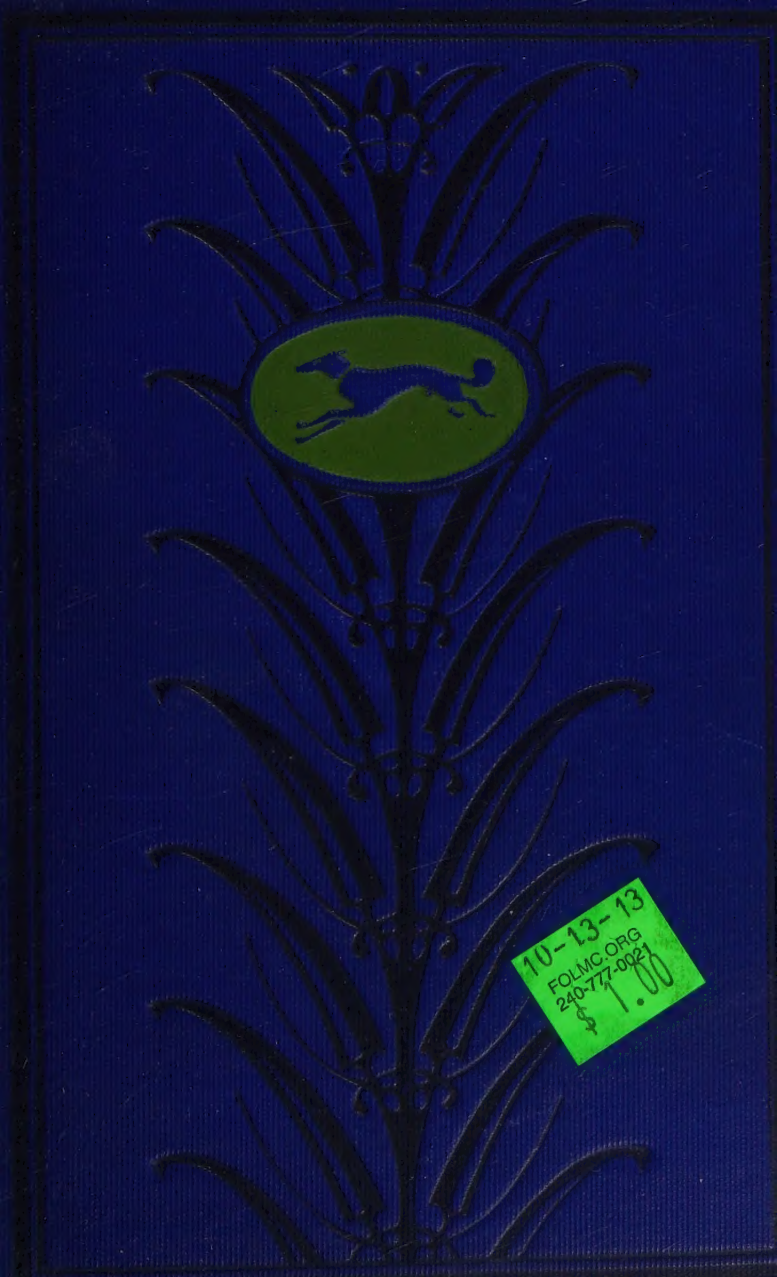
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THE CHINA SHOP

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NEW YORK: ALFRED · A · KNOPF

THE CHINA SHOP

by

G. B. STERN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WILSON FOLLETT

NEW YORK
ALFRED · A · KNOPF

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TO

NOEL COWARD

In memory of much china broken
at St. Merryn in August, 1918

INTRODUCTION

At whatever risk of undermining credit with the reader of this brief testimony, I have to begin with a word of confession and reparation. It was I, principally and perhaps solely, who insisted that two of Miss Stern's novels—the first two which appeared in America—should be called out of their names.

The first, *Debatable Ground,* came into my hands under its original English title, *Children of No-Man's Land,* in the immediate wake of the calamitous years 1914–18. The war, still fresh in every occidental mind, was ranklingly fresh in many; Miss Stern's book was not, in its final significance, a war novel; the legend that readers were "tired of the war" had assumed, among publishers and reviewers, the most formidable proportions. Here was a first brilliant and authentic picture of what would presently become familiar as the younger generation; and it struck me as seriously prejudicial to its momentary fortunes to present it under a title certain to suggest to every reader the bitter business of the western front. In short, I argued myself into becoming victim to a timidity quite characteristic of the mental behaviour of that period—a timidity which it would have been creditable to see beyond and to resist. And thus I

helped to suppress what appeals to me now as being a very fine, a very expressive title indeed. I can hardly imagine how the badgered author mustered enough good nature to put up with this crude and trivial attack on the integrity of her performance, well though she probably realized that it was meant in the service of that very integrity. Against enemies, a trenchant author is always capably armed; but what is to save compliant authors from the devastating solicitude of officious friends of their work?

That I became, in a more fundamental sense, a genuine enough friend to *Children of No-Man's Land* is the only remembered fact which could give me the courage of this tardy confession of sin. To the whole sense and purport of the book, as to that of its author, my response was, I like to recall, as immediate as it has since remained constant. There could be no missing the door swung wide upon a spacious and lighted chamber of fresh experience. But I find it difficult or impossible to recover that queer post-war mood which could, at one and the same time, thrill intelligently to the perception of Miss Stern's achievement and yet imagine, anything but intelligently, that it mattered by what name the achievement was called. In the long run, the old title refuses to be dislodged; in the long run, it comes obstinately back to take the place of its merely clever alternative. It is, you see, the besetting fault of publishers and their advisers to be a little too exclusively preoccupied with the short run.

Miss Stern's second challenge came to me in the form of *Larry Munro,* published by Mr. Knopf in 1921 as *The China Shop,* and as that made permanent in the present format. The second of its three parts was called, in the London edition, "The China-Shop"—which phrase, when we neatly stole it to apply to the entire story, the author as neatly replaced by "Broken China," the eventual title of Part II.

Somehow I have failed to summon very much contrition for my share in this manipulation. The metaphor of the bull in the china-shop does actually run clean through the story, does actually express the centre and fulcrum of its subject. Larry Munro is the individual picked out by fate—that fate which is personality—to accomplish devastation in others' lives. But the story, after all, is of an inherited rivalry—that is, a relationship; the tragi-comedy is of relationships, interactions, throughout; and its closing cadence is in the relative major, with Larry dead and the ancient Larry-domination dead with him.

It occurs to me here that the one greatest structural merit of Miss Stern's work is that quality which, as it appears in this short novel, I conceive to be better hinted by the new title than by the old: I mean her dramatic force, a gift much in abeyance during the past two decades, which have been surrendered largely to biographic fiction. Dramatic force is the ability to keep the various human ingredients of a plot in solution until the chemistry of human nature

has worked out the eventual precipitate. Most novels are organized about a character. All of Miss Stern's novels are organized about a situation of several characters, all of whom are dynamic and, in a sense, equally important, as the cogs of clockwork are equally important. And not only are they equally important, but they are all kept steadily in the reader's mind; their psychic leverage is felt even in scenes in which they do not physically appear.

In the vast majority of novels, some one character of dominant interest is like an express train whose passage makes enough suction to draw along the straws and litter of smaller affairs. And even in the few quasi-dramatic novels, one character is likely to dominate this scene, another character that scene. As far as I can recall, Miss Stern is unique among her contemporaries in her faculty of keeping each member of a sizable group important all the time. Her principal technique of revealing characters as they are in themselves is to reveal them as they are in their relations.

To compare a small (but tight, perfect, and wholly self-justified) comedy with a great tragedy: Very much learned and laboured discussion of *Hamlet* has come to naught because it was based on the assumption that *Hamlet* is a one-man play—something that Shakespeare was too good an instinctive dramatist ever to compose. It was, I think, Mr. G. L. Kittredge who put criticism of the great tragedies back on a sounder basis by making the most of the fact, con-

stantly overlooked in modern criticism, that nearly every one of them exists as the history of a group. Their significance is dynastic rather than individualistic; the tragedy is of a court or a country, not merely a person. Fates are bound together. Hamlet would *like* to be himself; he *tries* to correspond to the isolated character-portrait which so many readers make of him; but his obligations and his acts are conditioned to the end by the social fact that he is Prince of Denmark. In her different medium and in the vein of deft, yet substantial high comedy, Miss Stern achieves over and over a masterly use of just this dramatic mode of portraiture. Kevin, for instance, in *The China Shop,* becomes even more intensely the son of Felicity in becoming the lover of Barbara; as husband of Barbara and father of Cubby, he is twice as consciously Larry's rival as before. And he is all of these *at once;* he is the more concentratedly each because he is all the others.

Mr. Francis Hackett, writing of *Debatable Ground* on its publication, accredited Miss Stern with "a sound grasp of Wells's dazzling technique." Her books since 1920 have, it seems to me, made it abundantly clear that she is most strong precisely where Mr. Wells was never strong at all. He, at his best, has been a biographizing—or autobiographizing—historian of one person in contact with social phenomena that are institutional and almost wholly impersonal. Filled indeed with adventure, his pages are almost wholly lacking in drama; and his "daz-

zling technique" is that of making the individual episodes dazzle because they are brilliantly written. It often makes little difference whether his diamonds glitter on the string or in the basket. Miss Stern is, I think, immeasurably less quotable—not because her writing is not brilliant, but because it is all so caught into the dramatic pattern that there is nowhere to stop quoting. If any reader imagines that her art is less difficult than Mr. Wells's at its best, he simply has not begun to estimate the adroitness with which she conceals it.

. . . . . .

It was easy, on the basis of *Debatable Ground*, to overestimate the relative importance of Miss Stern's brilliant command of detail—of what Mr. Hackett called the "sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued" and "jauntily frank" element in her work. It is easy, too, to misread the three books which followed it as minor novels, and to mistake their lack of area for lack of depth. As a fact, these three short books—*The China Shop*, *The Room*, and *The Back Seat*—restore the proportions and enormously increase the author's stature. They show her at once as essentially modern and broadly sane—not, thank heaven, safe-and-sane, but sane.

Her characteristic subject—it might almost be called her inveterate worry—is the infringement of the instinctive privacy of the human soul, not by those whom we hate, but by those whom we love and whose claims we have not the smallest disposition to

deny; the wearing-down of individual human dignity under the constant attrition of obligations which seem in themselves petty, but which can be defied only at the price of consequences anything but petty. The difficulty in *The China Shop* is that Larry has got himself twisted into the soul of Kevin until that soul is no longer Kevin's own; and in *The Back Seat* the undertone of tragic threat is the clash between a woman's two equal necessities of being herself and of forgetting herself in order to be adequate as mother and wife. As to *The Room,* it is so sharply focused on the one subject of the individual's dream of privacy, of inviolability, that it reads almost like symbolism.

Miss Stern's modernity is proved by her articulacy about this present-day consciousness of the need for a withdrawing-place where one can, as the ancient phrase has it, possess one's soul. And her sanity is proved by the fact that she is preoccupied with characters who make an intelligent—that is, a workable —compromise between the need to be left free and the need to keep one's engagements. Old-fashioned men and women are not articulate on the subject, and when they suffer from the modern malady they are perfectly sure that what is the matter with them is something quite different. New-fangled men and women understand the disease well enough, but they act as if it could be cured by yelling and throwing things. Miss Stern bridges the gap with an intermediate class—the class of instinctively "nice" per-

sons who have the inhibitions of the well-bred but will shake them off in the interest of anything sufficiently important; who inherit a code, but find that it must constantly be reinterpreted to remain adequate; who have, in a word, the courage to confront the uninspiring fact that only some sort of compromise is possible.

Perhaps Miss Stern herself would be repelled by so apparently moralistic a reading of her purposes. Yet the fact remains, and one casts about vainly for a more engaging form of statement. There is something in this novelist which compels her to illustrate her shrewdest perceptions in terms of folk panoplied in all the decencies, the traditional virtues. Kate Seton, with all her absent-minded casualness and candour, is a woman whose "fetish" is "clean manliness." Barbara is a "pretty schoolgirl" with "frank, questioning eyes," very "certain, in her rigid baby code, of right and wrong, straight and crooked." Prue, Larry's mother, is a "normally cheerful" person, "influenced still by Quaker prohibitions." And Kevin himself gives the woman he loves to the rival whom he hates, because he has caught himself taking an unfair advantage to win her. (" 'It happens I had to put things right for me with myself,' " he growls.) It is hard to escape the impression that, in the long run, Miss Stern finds such folk the best worth writing about. Anyone who wishes to quarrel with her choice has to do so in the face of her im-

pressive repeated demonstrations that such folk can also be the best worth reading about.

WILSON FOLLETT

March 13–14, 1926

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PART I—THE SHRINE

[1]

"LARRY MUNRO" . . .

As ever, the repetition of the name, even spoken by myself, goaded me through all the familiar stages of memory and exasperation and sense of unbearable injury, till it reached a climax when it seemed the whole universe was not space enough for me and Larry both; and that one of us would be crowded out and suffocated: one of us had better die.

And I cared about Larry sufficiently to wish I might be that one.

Here was the grotesque twist on the situation! Simple hatred is a strain; but when the hated oddly becomes also a beloved object, unconscious of offending, and offending by mere existence and vitality; when other persons and jealousies of other persons are involved; when all this tumult is separated in habitation by a mere garden wall, and that in fact only, not in metaphor—then it may be understood why I was seated in the blessed west-bound express which carried me, a fugitive from Larry and Larry and Larry Munro, to a household that knew only me, had never heard of Larry; that could not compare us, nor obviously wonder if I suffered from such propinquity as had been forced upon me; to a family that, if the

words "Larry Munro" were haphazardly spoken, would form no swift mind-picture of his slanting faun's eyes and mischievous crooked smile and red-brown hair rushing sleekly from his forehead as though combed backward by the wind.

And luxuriating in the prospect of such a household, cool respite for my chafed and elbowed spirit, by the time Devon's bold flare of colour waved like a flag beyond my carriage window, I was able dreamily to dissociate my ego from Larry-saga and Larry-idolatry; and marvel at the friendship between Felicity and Prue as though it were a thing of long ago, dimmed and frosted to legend; and yet muse upon it with the freshness of first-time wonder. For it was an odd friendship oddly begun; yet with a lilt in its oddity that rendered it almost divine . . . Larry Munro had been Prue's husband, and was to have been Felicity's husband, and they met at his death-bed.

[2]

I had stayed in the room with Felicity when Larry Munro died, because I wanted to make quite sure that I was not being humbugged again: I had twice seen him die upon the stage, and each time I believed in it with quiet satisfaction, until the shock of his subsequent entrance, splendid as ever, into Felicity's drawing-room. Such treatment naturally rendered me suspicious.

Felicity was my mother. I do not know how I

came to call her Felicity, or when I began to do so. It must have been in the baby stages of life; it pleased her—she was only eighteen when I was born, and reluctant for motherhood.

When the knock came at the outer door, it was I who let in the strange lady.

"Larry Munro?" she faltered.

"Yes. He lives here. He's not very well today. He'll soon be dead."

My six-year-old attempt to "break the news gently" was not as successful as one might have wished; Prue's small, whimsical features puckered suddenly to anguish—she pushed past me into the room with the big bed in it. . . . Felicity was on her knees at the far side of the bed . . . they must have first seen each other across the prone body of Larry Munro.

Or possibly that pretty piece of symbolism was adjusted by my later fancy. I have so often and so vividly added to my fragment memories of that meeting, by dramatic instinct, and by perception of Prue and Felicity, their ways and intonations and characteristics, that it would be to me as painful a process to subtract now from the inevitable shape, complete and luminous, into which I and time have crystallized the scene, as it would be to see pieces wantonly chipped off a much-prized ornament. For I do indeed value that scene. . . .

Through a sound of ticking clock and the wash of rain and rumble of distant traffic, I can certainly

hear some one saying: "Ought the child to be in here?"

It was Prue, the strange lady, who protested against my unseemly presence in the room. Felicity had forgotten me—forgotten me rather more than usual—for I was never an acute reality to her. She said vaguely: "Go outside, Kevin, and wait. . . ." But I knew the waiting would be long and dull; even the manservant was out—in quest of the doctor, probably; so I decided that just on this one occasion I need not uphold Felicity's authority by instant obedience—I had generally, for pride's sake, to insist with extreme punctiliousness and care about Felicity's authority over me, because she was herself so liable to let it sag.

Larry's head lay on Prue's breast; there must have been rest in that: his wife again, the wife who used to make him comfortable. But his eyes were fixed in drugged absorption on Felicity's restless pale-gold head. . . . *His* women! it was right that both should be present, since both loved him greatly.

And while there was still an atom of life in him to be shared, while he was still a male to evince a last faint preference, while his hand could still move uncertainly in the direction of one or the other, while it was still undecided for whom the last look was to be, or who had the strongest claim to grief, the two women clashed against one another's presence with all the resentful emotion that could be spared from love of Larry Munro dying. But presently there was a change, a stir, and then a greater silence in the room;

and flesh and blood had ceased to be, and flesh and blood rivalry. . . .

Prue stole round to the other side of the bed, put both her arms round Felicity's tired, quivering figure, her sodden cheek against the glister of pale gold hair, and whispered:

"Oh, my poor girl—my *poor* girl——"

I think that neither of them wept, but that they clung very closely together.

[3]

But memory shorn and stripped can only swear to admitting Prue, and "Go outside, Kevin" . . . and several days or weeks afterwards, a move from our own house into another neighbourhood; a boy, not much older than I, whistling astride a garden wall; and myself looking curiously up at him and demanding his name.

"Larry Munro."

"You can't be. He's dead."

"I'm Larry Munro all the same, I tell you."

"But—but I tell you he's dead. I saw him dead. You *can't* be Larry Munro," I reiterated suddenly, afraid, nevertheless, that this horror of resurrection might be just possible. There was no very definite likeness between the Larry Munro of forty-one and the boy on the garden wall—and yet—if any other creature on earth had claimed to be Larry Munro, I would have wholly scouted the notion; to

me, a name was then so inseparably attached to a personality, that a man dead meant the name dead too, as much as his limbs or his sight and hearing; I, Kevin Somers, would have been stunned past all reasoning at the news that there was another Kevin Somers in the world. And I had seen Larry Munro dead—dead—dead—I chanted in unholy triumph . . . to quell misgivings that whispered: "I wish that boy would go away before Felicity comes out—I don't want Felicity to see that boy. . . ."

[4]

Strangers and infrequent visitors were bothered and perplexed by our two adjoining and very much intermingled households. It was good fun to hear them comment on possible relationships; fixing up a joint family tree which branched us together weirdly and wonderfully; speculating why a bust of Larry's father should stand in Felicity's studio. They usually ended by assuming me certainly to be a stepson of somebody-or-other—which was not unhumorous, if I chose to regard it without bitterness; by leaving out the late Gilbert Somers altogether; and by wondering why Prue's brother Wentworth permitted the irregular intimacy.

Wentworth himself admitted it to be irregular; but explained carefully that of course he would not have permitted it had Felicity been actually *married* to Larry Munro, but as he had died four days beforehand, she was really no relation. . . .

Wentworth Sheppard had charged himself with the care of Prue and Prue's son, after she had divorced her scapegrace husband—divorce that nearly broke her heart—but she was older than Larry Munro, and she had plagued him too little and loved him too well, so he left her with a baby of eighteen months . . . ran off with the Adventuress of his company of touring melodrama, even as he had once run off with Prue herself—Prudence, of Quaker stock, cooped up overlong with exacting religion and stiff, horsehair furniture and a querulous mother—even as he had nearly run off with the rich girl-widow Felicity Somers. Larry Munro made his success off and on the stage by bold abduction: the Young Lochinvar style of courtship, toned down and re-dressed to suit the nineteenth century; but given full play as swashbuckler and highwayman in the numerous "costume dramas" through which he dashed and duelled and eloped and proved his honour ringingly, night after night, till his last illness took him by the throat. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that this Larry must have been something more than a cloak-and-dagger hero, which might have sufficed for the Adventuress, but would hardly have exacted such luminous and steadfast passion from women like Felicity and Prue. What was the deep, hidden spring of the fascination?—an unquenchable wild optimism that walked with head thrown back through the most sodden mire of difficulties?—gay conviction that he could twirl romance as one twirls a trencher, and keep it a-twirl at his

pleasure?—blend of exasperating child and chubby egoist and good-looking braggart?—was he really no more individual than this stale type, for whom Felicity could go tragically restless and alone through the years of my schoolboyhood? memory-driven as dust before the wind; her moments sharp and salty with unfulfilled longings: . . . "If only he had lived four days longer!" But she had been cheated of Larry; he had never been wholly hers—never, never; and now she could only guess of the golden lover he might have been. And Prue, while so often she sat—I have seen her—with Wentworth reading aloud on the other side of the fire, and her lips twitching to a secret smile, part roguish . . . she might well have been thinking of that good year or two before Larry had abandoned her.

And yet, with these evidences before me of a thing unquenchable, I had dared to suppose death would have rid me of Larry Munro? Why—ours were no two houses side by side, but one house in which lived Prue and Felicity and a shrine and a boy. . . . Wentworth and I and the garden wall were the sole unrealities; only Wentworth had not perceived it, which was fortunate for him. And I had. Wentworth and I were the disconnected shadows of the household, tolerated, honoured even, as tiresome, surface attachments of the surface life which Felicity and Prue had led before they came together as mourners.

They were a quaint and incongruous couple; Felicity was so much the younger as almost to be of

another generation; Felicity, with her delicate, forlorn beauty; her wanton carelessness of consequence; her brilliance, which flickered with eerie suddenness into speech or judgment or creation, and then would as suddenly sheathe itself in a quality of haziness, leaving her helplessly incapable of living through a moment of her life without direction and support; Felicity, "entertaining" in a setting which scoffed at expense, was not unlike a complete and successful embodiment of a Society Paragraph. But Felicity dealing with tradesmen, children, officials, animals or servants, behaved—well, more like a wistful, charming idiot than a responsible human. Prue, who from the first day we moved into the grey, rambling house incongruously planted next door to her own neat red-brick villa, took Felicity vigorously in hand, even Prue sometimes despaired of drilling the other's errant waywardness into practical conformity.

She was a dear, quaint body, this wife of Larry the first; full of sharp little economies, and method with servants, and resource over a burn, blister or birth. Neighbours were continually sending for her in emergencies—there was a flavour of village midwife about her career; perhaps a Quaker grandmother had been famous in this profession. She destroyed sentiment by a brisk rub-up the wrong way till its sleekness was all a-spike and a-tingle; but she could worry over irrelevant people's irrelevant worries—provided they were tangible—with an activity that astounded Felic-

ity, to whom fellow-creatures existed either as a dim crowd jostling somewhere in space, or else as one single being who had exacted fearful sacrifice and worship.

Prue's mentality was plain, not spotted; and she had only good to say of others—unless it were a burst of honest and deserved indignation. That, too, perplexed Felicity, who could damn any one who bored her, quite regardless of their virtues; that is to say, she could achieve damnation for them with a phrase let fall so absent-mindedly as to lead you to believe she might just as well have meant it for some one else—till you came to think it over. Felicity's entire life conveyed an impression of an inspired thing brought about by a series of vague and happy accidents . . . you could almost catch your breath and thank Heaven for abstaining from the slip which would have ruined all. Her beauty was thus, and her sculpture; she never tried for the elusive likeness, but looking the other way, as it were, tossed it over her shoulder, and it happened. By the same process, it appeared a wonder that the people who loved her most, did not hate her most . . . she had caught their devotion miraculously by the skin of her teeth.

And again, it was Felicity's perverse nature that caused her to exact devotion from the one source where it was never forthcoming—from her servants. Servants drifted in and strayed out of our household—you could not say she was ever quite definite enough

to engage them or give them notice—and she never ceased to expect in them the dogged attachment of old family retainers—the silver-headed type that would bring her their savings when she was ruined, and beg to be allowed to stay on without wages; she would not even have minded a little bullying from these: "Old servants are naturally tyrants, aren't they, Prue?" . . . but the not unreasonable indifference towards her mistress's personal happiness displayed by a parlourmaid of a fortnight's standing, sent Felicity petulantly complaining next door, where Prue laboured under no delusion that Martha the cook would die for her, but saw to it that Martha did not waste gravy.

"Oh dear, Prue, I didn't mean to disturb you on your At Home day . . . I had forgotten; let me escape before any *more* of your dreadfully dull visitors begin to arrive. . . . That's the lady with a disgraceful husband who has been forbidden by the company to travel on the London South-Western railway because he insults first-class female passengers when they're alone, isn't she? I think it is so nice of him to want to insult *first*-class passengers . . . it shows, in a way, that he has the instincts of a gentleman—but it all doesn't make her any less dull; isn't it odd?—one would suppose it might brighten her up. Prue, darling, how can you have any one in your drawing-room who wears black thread gloves? Or is it sort of doing penance for her husband like Jane Shore? Would you like me to go and talk to

her?" After which fairly audible monologue, Felicity would seat herself beside the visitor under discussion, and encircle her about and about in charm, till Mrs. Western waddled home in an invisible silken mesh of Felicity's winding. "And I never once asked her how Mr. Shore contrives to get about without travelling, though I was really interested to know."

Prue cried in despair: "My dear child, poor Mr. Western—Western, not Shore——"

"Well, why did you tell me his name was Shore?"

"I did *not*, Felicity!—and he was a most highly respected railway official, only his doctor had to forbid him to travel alone towards the end of his life because his heart wasn't strong; he died of syncope at last, and she's still in mourning."

But Felicity invariably dotted her t's and crossed her i's. And when corrected and carefully shown at what exact stage of fact she had begun to go astray, she would listen attentively, as to a new story altogether, and be impressed by it to such an extent . . . that her previous mistake was dinted in deeper even than before. There was an obstinate blank spot in Felicity's brain; fifty times contradicted and scratched out, the scandal of Mr. Western and the lonely female passenger would survive and become an obsession. *I* knew it was safest to pass over the original error, and trust that Felicity would forget the whole story. But Prue never ceased from striving to make her accurate, domestic, and methodical. I wonder how Prue managed to be all these things herself, and

yet never be wearisome to Felicity; as I wonder how Felicity continued to be her fantastic self, and never shock Prue. Unless, for memory's sake, Felicity conquered her faculty for being bored, and Prue her faculty for being outraged.

And even where memory of Larry Munro steeped them like two entirely different fabrics in the same rich dye, they characteristically retained their contrast. Prue never mentioned his name; her soul scurried past this dominating passion of her life as though frightened of it—a sombre, flame-tipped mountain in an aspect of tiny molehills . . . How had it come to be there? Or, in a more practical morning mood, you could almost hear her reasoning with the mountain: "Come, come, no such nonsense! you're in the way here, can't you see that? Everything in its proper place and time, and give as little trouble as you can, because this is Monday and I've got my hands full up with work."

No, it was not in shame that she denied herself expression of her love for Larry Munro; but to her it may well have seemed that such divinely tender friendship with Felicity was memorial enough—it stood solidly erected for any one to see. A superfluity of sighs and sobs and small, sacred recollections exchanged between them would have brought to the intimacy a flavour of indecency, to Prue's mind.

Only Felicity had a disconcerting habit of speaking of the late Larry just whenever it occurred to her —"My dear, you can't expect me to look on your son

as an Immaculate Conception, as Wentworth does!" —lightly violating poor Prue's most fundamental religious and social instincts, and completing the horror by causing her to laugh—for Prue had a nimble sense of humour, and the apt remark about Wentworth delighted her.

Wentworth Sheppard was an old maid, small and neat as his sister; and with a certain likeness to King George in his pointed beard and the cut and hang of him generally, on which resemblance he built up a whole formal attitude. He cultivated the extreme simplicity of good form in his household—was not the Royal Family notoriously addicted to rice pudding diet, symbolic and actual? Fortunately, Wentworth's mild mania in this respect accorded well with Prue's essays in economy. He rarely talked haphazardly, but "conversed with intelligent interest on all topics." To strangers and visitors, he Unbent Genially—you could watch him doing it like clockwork. He drank water, because Prue considered wine a medicine, not a beverage; but he drank water portentously, with the air of Setting an Example to the Nation. And though he longed to spoil Larry, he strove hard that his nephew should receive an education of severe practicability, in ignorance (after the manner of Royalties) that he was heir to a throne. . . .

Or heir to a shrine. But then Wentworth himself was ignorant of the importance of the shrine in our midst. Dubious at first over the proximity of the Somers, he very soon took a fancy to Felicity—ah,

Felicity saw to that!—and even began to trust that the society of himself and his sister might be beneficial to her. "If not too upsetting for you, Prue, my dear?"—and might in time, by representing the unostentatious spectacle of a quiet, wholesome, happy English home, tone down a certain regrettable exuberance in Felicity's environment, and—and,—well, something like astigmatism in her moral outlook.

Wentworth and Felicity continued, till the end, on terms of the most amiable cross-purpose. She thought that she was managing him, and he thought that he was influencing her. Prue laughed at them both, and —metaphorically—flipped them with her duster.

Wentworth's one instinctive concession to the shrine of an undesirable brother-in-law was his reluctance to include an intelligent interest in the theatre, among his other exhibitions of broad-mindedness. He did not care for his sister to visit the theatre at all—he evidently thought it might remind her of what she had forgotten.

Young Larry neither sang nor recited, nor displayed any other prodigy inheritance—except a tendency to whistle, whistle from morning till night. I can hear him, mournful, exultant, melodious . . . up and down the stairs, splashing in his bath, down the garden in his scamper next door. . . . He was nearly always next door—with us.

[5]

What chance did I stand against Larry? I, who

was in all outward respects a reproduction of Gilbert Somers. Had I been able to make Felicity love me better, she would have loved my father for looking like me, so it was all my fault. . . .

This was my infantile reasoning.

But I learnt to reverse the argument to its proper sequence, when I saw what young Larry gained in spontaneous tenderness and privilege of caress, through being the son of Larry Munro. I learnt definitely what I had always suspected; that my father, that handsome picture of a cavalier, with the blank wall behind his looks, had disappointed the radiant, all-expectant girl, whom he had married out of the schoolroom, to a state of indifference bordering on apathy. And this was my inheritance.

Well, I had never worn myself out fretting against Felicity's vapoury lack of demonstration, while I thought it was her nature, unalterable, to be accepted with a philosophic shrug of the shoulders. . . . But presently I was to watch the awakening of all her warm maternity—and for a contemporary of my own. It was an interesting spectacle, but rather too poignantly so where I was concerned. "I'm her own son, and he isn't! It must make a difference—it *must*. Nothing he does will make him as if he was her son!" . . . Ah, but I had never guessed she could be so adorable with the child she loved . . . bright flushed cheeks, and her hand rumpling through his hair; a thousand whimsical distractions planned that the little scamp might not feel dull; a thousand absurd

nonsense names she invented for him: "Larrikin" and "Humpty" (because she had first seen him sitting on a wall). . . . Soft, husky inflection in her voice when she called to him—"Hallo, Larry darling, I've got a surprise for you!" . . . There were always surprises for Larry. And she never forgot to consult his tastes, and to cater for them; she, with memory usually so misted, could recall exactly, and to a shade, what young Larry liked.

This was different treatment and a different atmosphere from the austerity of his own home, where Wentworth advocated good form in the shape of boiled milk puddings and plenty of cold water; and Prue alternately slapped and chaffed her only son out of all possible affectations, swagger, and extravagances. Prue believed firmly that all boys were healthy young animals, who hated superfluous carpets and fuss, and were all the worse for coddling unless they were ill, which they had no right to be. Though deep down in her heart Larry was acknowledged a very special boy indeed, though she was wrapt up in him to the exclusion of every one else; yet even to him the stock rules applied: Give him plenty to do, plenty of exercise, plenty of wholesome food; see that he wears flannels in winter, make him wash behind the ears and be kind to animals, give him only sixpence a week pocket-money, let the man of the house thrash him as often as he is discovered in mischief—and with a bit of luck he will grow up into a plucky, clean-limbed, creditable young Englishman.

It's the bit of luck that so often fails these dealers in the generic boy.

Larry was a glorious little ruffian—but with senses thrillingly flexible and resilient. He could give and take in the touch market without self-consciousness ever cramping him to unnatural self-control. And Prue, who was sure that all boys must necessarily hate being fussed over, Prue was a martyr to her own conviction, which she would not allow to make exception, even in the case where she most longed to make it. While Felicity, less wise—Felicity got the kisses!

Though I doubt if Prue minded. I imagined her using the argument: "After all, I'm his own mother!" with a great deal more success than I could infuse into my similiar tag: "After all, I'm her own son!" And verily, if I had gone to Prue claiming any sort of kinship of jealous suffering, she would have blown my head off in a gale of common sense and banter and cheery misconception . . . sometimes I nearly understood why Larry the first had run away from this perpetual process of having a waste-paper basket clapped over his enthusiasm.

Larry loved his mother—carelessly. Wentworth bored and irritated him; so did the Spartan rigours of home—as applied to the little Princes of Wales. Prue's mistake had been never to pander to the incipient man in him. Larry was her baby, her only child—but these are both sexless terms. He was enervated by the more barbaric blow of colour in the

house next door; the soft glimmer and sheen of Felicity's idolatry could not fail to appeal to him. His Palace Beautiful, with its pictures and books and rugs and statuary, was irresistibly new and jolly, and even furnished complete with a comrade in the boy line. Oh yes, he liked me. So, indeed, did Felicity . . . she liked me very much. And she never forgot her exquisite manners so far as to let me feel left out; I was given everything—tangible—that Larry was given. But, "Kev and I are not demonstrative; we understand each other!"

Undoubtedly she would have missed my clenched protection. She consulted me at intervals with as much deference as though I were the old family solicitor. And when I gradually developed a brain and a caustic sense of humour, she confided in me her grateful relief that she was not doomed to dwell for ever with a person—"as stupid as that terrible man, Gilbert Somers—your poor, dear father, you know, Kevin!" Our meals began to be enlivened by mutual and brilliant word-sparring. In fact, I was a combination of minor uses, such as one can seldom hope to find in a son. Only——

Oh, mother, mother, your arms round me once, as so often they were flung round Larry. . . .

Well, one cannot always be a cynic and a philosopher—at eight and nine and ten years old. Sometimes at night, I used to behave like a very babyish small boy—just by way of a change.

[6]

Larry was eight and I was six when our seniors, with that callous disregard for any possible incompatibility of tempers in beings not yet adult, plumped us down in gardens indifferently separated, and said that we would soon be great friends. As it happens, their prophecy was realized.

I had just managed to hate Larry the first, terrified all the time that he would exert himself to overcome my scowls. . . . I had seen Felicity's opposition melted like froth by the darlin' wicked ways of him, as Irish tongues would twist it; and I knew how easily I would capitulate if he once turned his attention seriously to such unimportant conquest. But I bored him and fidgeted him; he used to say discourteously: "Get rid of the brat, Felicity!" . . . So I just managed to hate him—*con amore*—till the end. I could sympathize with Felicity, though, in her infatuation—my God, yes!

Larry the second—little brute!—decided that a chum of more or less his own age would be a handy matter to have next door . . . and the rest was a foregone conclusion.

Primarily we tumbled into mischief together, and were together lectured by Wentworth—that formed a bond. It happened again, and he punished Larry severely, and sent round a perfectly polite message to Felicity requesting that she should do the same by me, or, lacking the strength, permit him the privilege, as he considered it a blow to a boy's fundamental

sense of justice that where two were equally in fault, only one should suffer. Felicity, looking worried, consulted me:

"Oh dear, Kevin, must I take any notice of this?"

"You'd better let me hear the letter,"—non-committal for the moment.

She read it aloud.

"What a fuss!"

"Isn't it?" she agreed delightfully; "but we don't want to quarrel with the old man, do we? It would make things so awkward for Prue. Do you think if I sent you to bed—?"

As it was then already past eight o'clock P. M., it struck even my understanding that such punishment would not be regarded by Wentworth as adequate. But it annoyed me that Felicity should be bothered, and I soothed her by a promise to step round to Wentworth the following morning and let him do his damndest.

It was not a horrible precocity on my part which prevented me from evading punishment where evasion was so easy; but an inarticulate conviction, early forced upon me and accepted in a semi-humorous spirit, that Felicity was too indifferent for her job where I was concerned, and that a spoilt, whining infant would bring discredit upon her—shame her incapacity in sight of the world. By pretending that I was disciplined by a rod of some severity, I could keep up appearances for Felicity's sake; but the rod was in my own hand.

It was typical of Felicity that she did not even ask what was the offence we boys had committed; something to do with taps left running till a stair-carpet was ruined, I believe—nothing serious, at all events; but there is quite an amount of ungodliness connected with cleanliness when two urchins set out to be inventive in a bathroom.

Larry and I received a mild thrashing apiece, and then wandered out into the garden to grumble in fellowship. Oddly enough, I found he held the same austere views as mine concerning the muffishness and general lack of dignity about the boy who has been well spoilt at home. We could neither of us express ourselves on the subject, of course:

"Mums hates it when I get into a row, but she always makes out that I've done worse than it is, case old uncle lets me off; an' then *he* makes it out worse 'cos he's afraid mums'll beg him not to hurt me—an' they pile it up between them so's I get it worse than if I hadn't been an only child. An' yet mums adores me so, she'd die for me any time I liked."

"I'm an only child, too—" a pause, . . . and then I added: "My mother'd die for me too, all *over* the place."

Larry began to boast. "Mums sat up with me two weeks without moving when I had diphtheria—the doctor said he'd never *seen* such devotion!"

And I swaggered back: "When I had dip-dipferia, my mother sucked the something-or-other an' saved my life an' the doctor said it might have killed her an'

he'd never seen such devotion!" Fiction had given me the advantage that time; Larry was momentarily daunted—and then pressed on:

"Mums hasn't married again 'cos of me; I heard uncle say so."

"Nor my mother hasn't married again because of me."

Well—it was busy work, inventing Felicity's "no-more-than-natural" feeling, even though Larry had twice given me the lead. My neck and cheeks were burning hot with the strain, smarted under Larry's puckish gaze—did he suspect me? To divert his mind, I let off an inconsequent but excellent imitation of "Fi'-fresh-strawbrish" as bawled down the streets in June, by the man with the barrow . . . an accomplishment of which I was proud; I could do the coal-man's cry as well, and the muffin-man, and chairs-to-mend. Larry listened with admiration, and then suggested we should saunter innocently up the road, and see how many occupants of the houses we could draw to the window and door by my hoarse promise of "Fi'-fresh-strawbrish." . . . The month happened to be November, which we had forgotten, but otherwise the game was completely successful; curiosity ramped on to the little iron balconies, in wonder whence the shout originated; and nobody suspected the demure little boy strolling on the pavement beside the other demure little boy. . . . "Street-cries" became a favourite pastime of ours, though Larry never attained to my pitch of excellence; and

was therefore the first to tire of it, and to suggest we should return to our old passion for floatables; that is to say, anything in the nature of barge, boat, raft, sail or steamer—whatever requires water below it. Presently we were nearly drowned together in the Serpentine; Larry boasted he had saved my life, and I contended hotly that I had saved his; but as we could neither of us swim, perhaps it was the boatman's credit, after all. And Prue promptly whisked us off to the instructor at the nearest swimming-baths.

From floatables our interest shifted to mechanics. Felicity's priceless Dresden clock, Wentworth's typewriter, Prue's sewing-machine and carpet-cleaner, were all pleasant to take to pieces and investigate; our favours were entirely impartial, but we were interested to find that on this occasion Prue's temper was the worst of the three.

Love was our subsequent experience shared—at least, I was pursued by the object of Larry's passion, and he kicked me for it, which I considered wholly unfair. "I don't want the nobby little beast"—the Honourable Nina was the daughter of Lord Barclay, one of the endless aristocratic widowers, relics of the Somers period, whose aristocratic feet decorated the parquet at Felicity's receptions—"can't you keep her to yourself?"

As this was exactly what Larry most desired to do, I was, perhaps, not being tactful. But Nina's big brown eyes and wavy black hair were too like my own to rouse my dormant emotions. It was only weari-

some to have out-rivalled Larry over a woman of no importance—to me.

"It's your looks," he said, sitting astride of me, and moodily reducing them to a pulp.

I did not deprecate; I *was* a very handsome boy—obviously and blatantly handsome, as my father had been. Mine was the type of face that led the casual observer to expect a character full of cheap Toreador effects. . . . "Fancy *you* being so sarcastic!" was the astonished and disappointed cry that even at the age of eleven caused me an unholy inward glee; or they supplemented their comment—"so horrid and sarcastic!"—Evidently the Hon. Nina, one year my senior, found the blend attractive.

Larry added: "I s'pose it'll always be like that. Why, even now you're as big as me, even though you're only a kid. One day a girl will come along——"

True enough! One day a girl would come along . . . or we would come along to where a girl, *the* girl, awaited us, two men—but I foretold as an absolute certainty only one girl—life was already shaping us for the catastrophe. And Larry would have grown up to that type of ugliness which she would presently begin to find oddly beautiful; and I to that type of beauty which she would presently begin to find oddly boresome. . . .

So vivid was my fancy at that instant, that I could see her, a slim golden creature a-sway towards Larry . . . I was nowhere in the picture, and her face was a

dim mystery, but I was clearly aware of his attitude of triumph.

In the case of the Hon. Nina, the preference had only been given to me because I could have dispensed with it. The imp of destiny whom it amused that my life should everywhere be confronted by Larry Munro, had arranged it thus. Next time——

All this, a barely coherent impression, following with a rush on Larry's remark in the vein of despondent wooer—I jerked my knees upwards and flung him suddenly on to the floor—the signal for a scrap! In a moment all question of the Hon. Nina vanished to an ecstasy of squeals and pummellings.

But next time—I began then to watch out for the inevitable occasion when the existence of a Larry Munro on earth should most effectually spoil my happiness; to watch for it, and morbidly to dread it . . . if it were to be anything like the vision of Felicity's maternal instinct unfolding itself.

Felicity came into the room, and Larry flashed her one of his impudent crooked grins: "Help! Murder!" he shouted boisterously.

Murder! . . . our scuffling bodies drew to closer grips and closer . . . suddenly, at the pressure of his pinioned limbs, my easy enjoyment of the scrap flared to murder indeed. . . . My enemy—Larry's father as well as Larry himself—I was in physical contact at last with the elusive. . . . Larry-thing! . . . More than I could bear. . . . Might never happen again. . . . Control? what does it

matter . . . he—he doesn't give me room to breathe . . . and Felicity. . . .

If one were to dig—dig something into him . . . Mustn't let go—no, don't let go . . . he'll always be there if you let go now—if you don't hurt him—kill him—with your teeth—

"Damn! . . . You young swine!"

"Goodness gracious me, boys, what language!" that was Prue, humorously admonishing us. My vicious fury was quenched; and I behaved fairly meekly while, in his character of senior, Larry punished me by a hearty thrashing—and let me go.

"I'll teach you to bite when we rag! Good Lord, if you can't fight good-naturedly——"

I sought to justify myself by ingenious argument: "It's only idiots who fight good-naturedly. Fighting is an angry thing to start with. And a good-natured fight is para—para——"

"—doxical," finished Felicity. "Ought he to use words like that, Prue? And ought we to let a little boy hit a big one—isn't there something about it in the rules?"—helplessly.

Prue replied that boys will be boys, and that exercise on a rainy day gave them appetites—"as long as they don't hurt the furniture,"—ignoring the ethics of the case.

"And which of us is the 'little boy'?" demanded Larry, still breathless from his exertion to educate me "Kev's topped me by nearly half an inch, or—or of course I wouldn't—what do you think? He's

going to be much bigger than me," with an injured look towards Prue's small, trim figure. Then—"Did-dums hurtums?" magnanimously bending over me where I still lay gracefully recumbent. "What a Sleeping Bee-yuty! I was lamming into him because he had such a pretty mug," he further explained to Prue and Felicity. "Yus—it was a female woman come between us! like bruvvers we wos, till then!"

"So you fought because of me," murmured Felicity, with a sort of preoccupied infallibility. "Did you?" she pleaded for affirmation; a new Guinevere, even in this paltry nursery squabble between two youngsters, unable to bear that she should not be the queen about whose tormenting beauty the tournament had raged.

"The very idea! Whatever next!" in brief expostulation from Prue; "boys don't fight about their mothers."

"But you are not Kevin's mother."

Felicity meant: "But I am not Larry's mother."

[7]

"Good night, Felicity."

I hovered near the door, stretching out my cramped courage to its utmost. Perhaps Larry was only rewarded because he took the confident initiative; perhaps if I once smashed the accepted formula: "Kev and I are not demonstrative." . . .

Her head was bent musingly over a form of embroidery—spangling, I think it was called; a tiny gold disc shimmered on her poised needle; a glittering shower was poured from the wee, glass-lidded box on the table beside her; the standard lamp with its amber silk shade spilt more gold on her cloudy hair.

I broke indecision like a stick across my knee; sped across the room, and . . . kissed her. Only once—but she must have felt my heart thumping against her side. . . .

Never again!—oh, never again while I live! That upward look of casual astonishment was enough. . . .

"Oh?—good night, Kev."

[8]

School was a disappointment. I had hoped that among such a large selection of boys, I would easily find a substitute for Larry as comrade; thus setting me free to hate him, roundly and smoothly, uncomplicated by the want of him and the love of him. I assured myself that Larry was indispensable merely as a result of circumscribed choice.

The boys of Runchester were all right. The boys of Wilton House, our preparatory school, had also been all right. Only—only—Good Lord!—I grew impatient—surely at least *one* of them might have contrived to put up a better show against my incubus! Just something in the eager poise of his body when he ran; the careless blackbird note of his whist-

ling; just the wickedness in his slanting no-coloured eyes, which were almost sloe-green, and not quite yellow, and often hazel—all the woodland tints—oh, and his naïve manner of toppling his whole life on to the nearest and handiest shoulders and leaving it there; a queer trick he had of following up a remark compounded all of joyous swagger, by an outburst of super-swagger so out of proportion and ridiculous as to convey the impression he sought: that really he had only been fooling the first time also!

If I could once have arrested myself in full swing of hating Larry, I do honestly believe that I need never have started again. But he gave me no chance to stop; here at school, worse even than at home, he elbowed me out of existence; sunnily unconscious of the process, but perfecting it, it would almost seem, by mechanism.

I was not temperamentally jealous, that I swear. Mine was a locked jealousy, stagnant around one object, as opposed to the tidal jealousy which ebbs and flows and overflows and swamps indiscriminately. Beyond Larry, the creatures of the universe might have their hearts' desires granted to them, and I could decently rejoice, even help them to attainment; beyond Larry, I winced at hearing no person praised; nor grudged them their meed of fortune. Beyond Larry. . . .

But they were wrong who said there was always enough to go round, whether of love, or popularity, or success. Some grinning malignancy had arranged

that what was more for Larry Munro should be less for Kevin Somers, always and always.

Steady now! No good to batter yourself against defeat pre-ordained. Steady—you'll hurt yourself! Look—it's quite a good joke really . . . can you laugh at it? Excellent! Then you're not mad . . . just for a second I was afraid. . . .

What I began to do at school was this: to annex bits of the world for myself, populate them, and fortify them against Larry. Every new friendship I regarded as a spiked fortification.

And Larry slipped through the spikes.

He *must* have known—the happy persistence with which he invariably chummed with my latest chum proved it. Sometimes, even while my selection was still unspoken—a mental gesture of "you'll-do-next," even then a series of tiny accidents would incredibly bring about an encounter between Larry and this particular boy; I would have to watch them beginning to like each other; then quietly I renounced the claim, no one the wiser for my silent choice and withdrawal. Friendships which included Larry were obviously no use to me, foreseeing times when my nerves would urgently cry aloud, yelp in agony, for a retreat where Larry was not, nor likely to be.

Talk of Bruce's spider!—was it only a paltry seven times that he essayed to spin his web, and the eighth time succeeded? I had no respect for Bruce's spider.

And not only in human traffic of boys and masters,

mind you, this tormenting pursuit in whichever direction I ran, and the kick, kick, at my heels, but if I became keen on any abstraction, science, or a period of history, there, just behind me, alongside, in front of me, was Larry. If I excelled in some special form of sport . . . Larry again, emulating, outrivalling me; for the mere fact that he was also there, dulled my enthusiam, and I dropped away. Larry! Larry! leave me *alone*—I want my pals *alone* —I want to walk without meeting you in my favourite thickness of the larch wood aslant on the hill—I want to hear the cry: "Somers is an A1 bowler on a fast wicket," without the addition: "Rather—and so is Munro!" Once we were actually bracketed second in an examination in which we had both striven keenly for a top place; physical geography, I think it was.

Holidays were a respite; for then I could abandon myself to the absolute ease of Larry's society, without perpetual misgiving that I ought to be building new fortresses against the inevitable future, or walking round the established ones to make sure of the encircling spikes, or in sick irritation watching Larry in other company, being charming, being himself.

Certainly, in the holidays, home and Felicity came into being. But the bond between Larry and my mother seemed to slacken during his lithe race through the schoolboy years, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. He evaded caresses, not awkwardly, but mind and

body in its amazed awakening twisted shyly away from touch or question.

"Besides, you know, Kev, Felicity is such a delirious duffer about Runchester. The mater has twice her sense."

Well, it was true enough that Felicity's conception of a boy's public school was gloriously out of focus; but immediately I asked Larry if he considered himself any more at ease in "Igg-liff," as we always called Felicity's social entertainments. This, as it happens, was nasty, for Larry, at a recent dinner party, had made quite a conspicuous ass of himself—something to do with the proper sequence of drinks; and his partner had been heard informing Felicity that he was too deliciously infantile for words, and the memory of it all was still a hot blush to Larry.

It was not likely I would allow any one, not Larry nor any one else, to laugh at Felicity; just because I could myself chuckle inwardly at her delirious dufferisms, nevertheless she must not be exposed, defenceless and unaware, to alien laughter. So I went about with fists doubled and tongue edged.

Those holidays were best when Larry and I, touring on bicycle or on foot, were dependent on one another without outside distraction; and could map out our separate careers in that semi-burlesqued, semi-impersonal fashion which we imagined hid a genuine concern . . . off-hand shyness that every day's twilight and dusk merged again to a bolder intimacy. But I withheld from Larry down what stream I had

already swung my dream-argosies. He might—he would—choose the same for himself. . . . I pretended I was for engineering; bridge-building; rail-building. And all the while saw myself at grey old Oxford, and then with chambers in one of the grey old Inns of Court—I was ambitious for the Bar.

"I'm going to be an engineer, too," shouted Larry enthusiastically.

I knew it! and was glad of my deception; though ashamed to the depths of my soul of the obsession which festered to plots and secrets and laborious circumventions. Perhaps by next term hatred would have vanished.

And the next term I watched the symptoms recur like a chronic sickness. And the term after, they would be worse than ever.

At all events, he was leaving Runchester at eighteen, two years before I did. I looked forward eagerly to that period clear of him.

At seventeen, when other boys blunder through the hideous hobbledehoy stage, Larry lit up to quite amazing beauty—that elusive tiptoe gift which among maidens is known as *beauté du diable;* precious because indefinable, because at any moment it may wing away; because it tugs the tears to the eyes, and rouses an unquiet desperate wish to clutch at it and do something with it, quickly. . . .

Unlike Larry, I never was dowered with evanescent fascination. Perhaps that sort of miracle cannot happen on features already surpassingly excellent.

At all events, I had the consolation of knowing that I would make a handsome corpse, whereas there was no hope at all for Larry once life had fled from him.

At seventeen, also, he suddenly shed school interests; was impatient of such major matters as the tone of Runchester under the new prefecture; as careless and apathetic here, as he had previously been keen, he was already straining out to possibilities beyond Runchester.

And Prue, alarmed, started to invite nice flappers to play tennis. "You don't mind if we use your court, do you, Felicity? But ours is so cramped at the wall end where Wentworth plants his nasturtiums, and he does get so annoyed to have them trampled on; though I tell him it's what he must expect now, with young people about."

Prue applied nice flappers as a first-aid remedy to her shadowy alarms about Larry, without in the least bringing forward these shadows for clearer inspection. Influenced still by Quaker prohibitions on what they deemed sinful, she was as afraid for Larry the second in his adolescent phase, as she had been and still was afraid of her undying passion for Larry the first. Was she at all aware of the startling likeness which had sprung now into visibility, between the two of the dynasty? But even if she saw it, Prue was too normally cheerful to fret over such a superficial danger—"He's a good boy enough!" Prue had been very much better informed than Felicity over Runchester code, and thus she had stood high with Larry

during his three or four years of—neuter gender. She did not notice when it began to matter less to him that Felicity was unbalanced in her cricketing information; or how often he sauntered restlessly down the garden and through the gate in the wall. Next door was the right sort of luxuriant softness; interesting, gracious people to be met, celebrities, some of them; flowers in profusion; and colour strikingly massed or artfully subdued; and wine and good cooking; and Felicity's voice singing queer little song-snatches that thrilled by their incomprehensibility; and talk that dared and amused by a certain suppleness at its moral joints. Next door, in fact, Larry existed in surroundings originally supplied by Gilbert Somers—including caste.

Prue was wise in her statement that the genus boy (from twelve to sixteen) abhors carpets. Prue was foolish to forget that Larry was seventeen. His mother was no good to him at this juncture, but it did not matter, because he was able to confide in Felicity again; the barrier of the Runchester years was broken. They were once more as they had been when Larry was an urchin. I was forced back to remember again and again how adorable she could be with a child she loved . . . and presently re-accustomed myself to the pain of finding them in the studio, his head vivid against her knee, her fingers rumpling through his hair; bright flushed cheeks; tender inflexion in her voice as she called him by the absurd nonsense names invented long ago: "Larri-

kin" and "Humpty." It was as though he had returned from a long journey abroad.

One evening I walked into the studio, and found the picture just as usual . . . and knew that for them it was different, eternally and miraculously different, . . . and that there was no further need for me to remind myself fiercely: "I'm her own son, and he isn't!" Larry was putting up no more competition as Felicity's son.

I cannot tell why the certainty that they were imminent lovers smote me on that one entrance out of the thousand times that I had seen them in contact as close and as happy. Larry was not conscious yet of the difference—nor, I believe, was Felicity; but I cannot be sure.

It seemed ages and æons that I stood about and waited helplessly for their realization; and went back with Larry to Runchester; and returned home; and stood about and waited, I alone at one end of the world, and they at the other; and somewhere in space Prue's active, merry little person hoping that her son was "all right," and would one day make a good husband and father; "but, dear me, plenty of time for that!" . . .

Ages and æons—not quite a year, actually. The Christmas after Larry had left Runchester Felicity was swung up on a surge of creative power; exhibited two or three exquisite pieces of statuary at the Nouveau Siècle Galleries; and, hectic and excited by the kudos she received, insisted on modelling Larry's

head and shoulders—"Not you, Kevin; you're too obvious. You shall be my model when I'm reduced to doing pot-boilers!"

And in those hours she spent studying his lines and moulding the set of his head, pursuing the secret of his intangible boyish sweetness, mobile mischief of his mouth, and fleeting desire in his eyes, she must have started more than once at the subtly unfolding likeness to the first and only man she had loved.

Her torment of frustration was lulled, and longing passed magically away from her body and her soul; her abstracted brain was steadied and at peace; and her soul was like an opal, the blurred greys and mauves and blues shifting, clouding, parting to show the light bright fire shut in. Felicity was a girl again—Larry Munro had come back.

And for me the waiting was over.

And from Prue?—bitter reproaches?—a mother's curse?—a widow's hard resentment for her husband superseded and forgotten? Why, no, none of this fantastic rubbish. Prue quite simply did not know. She confided in me how thankful she was that my mother seemed to be "settling down more."

"Felicity, will you send me to school abroad somewhere?"

"Yes, dear. Do you want to learn the language? Are you sick of Runchester already?"

"I can't stand it any more."

And for once she was attentive to the harshness in my voice, and knew that "it" did not refer to Run-

chester. A pause, during which a question hovered on the air. . . . Then—

"Well, Kevin," kindly, "make what arrangements you like."

"I want to be *sent!*" impatient of my futile independence. And I added: "Don't let me come home for the holidays for a year or two. Then I'll be ready for Oxford."

"Larry is going to Oxford; he's in the seventh heaven."

For the first and only time I was guilty of melodrama.

"Larry can go to the seventh hell—for all I care!"

But at all events there was no more for me to suffer now. Larry Munro had robbed me twice over of what God had never once given me. So what else could he do?

"What shall I say to Prue when she asks why you've left your school?" Felicity could not be broken in one hour of the habit of turning to me for counsel.

"Oh, tell her that foreign travel widens the mind. Tell her that my father mentioned in his will I was to be educated in France. Tell her I was discovered hanging on to a sheet out of my dormitory window with a ginger-beer bottle between my toes, and they requested you to remove me."

I had forgotten that Felicity was only a semi-listener. Her subsequent version persisted that I had confessed to be in a scrape at Runchester, and was

begging her to take me away before I was discovered hanging myself from the dormitory window.

I went eventually to a college at Lausanne. And discovered winter sport to be an excellent soporific, leaving little space in which to brood . . . on the sudden opening of a studio door—two figures, a boy and a woman, in the far dusky alcove . . . woman's head bent and boy's head bent back. . . .

"Gare! Gare!! Gare!!!"—a crowded sleigh whizzed past our hungry procession a-tramp down the mountains from Château d'Oex. Jolly good days in the crunching weather. It was almost all right. I had almost forgotten. . . .

[9]

I was two years at Lausanne, three at Oxford. Larry had thought better of the university project, and allowed me this period unmolested—I felt it to be in the nature of a sub-let. He was meanwhile butting his way through the workshops of a first-class engineering firm in the Midlands; in due time he returned to London, professionally involved in new schemes for the extension of tube railways. I hardly dared believe yet that it would be safe for me to make open statement in his presence that I intended reading for the Bar, without tempting his swift emulation. But had some hitch occurred in the mechanism I had long ago accepted? Or had the poignant crisis of

five years back been also my liberation? For Larry merely said, "Going to take silk, are you, old man? May heaven in its mercy visit the Bench with deafness!"

I settled down in chambers off Middle Inn Gardens. Felicity made no comment on my determination not to live at home. But Prue took the unexpected view that I dwelt apart because I intended to lead a fast life; and quite comically disapproved of me; remonstrating with Felicity for permitting such callous independence: "Bless me, boys have got to sow their wild oats, and I don't ask Larry questions; but a decent home in the background and his mother to count his washing, make no end of a difference in the long run, Felicity, my dear!"

I laughed when Felicity reported this speech. And her gay, ironic eyes smiled back at me . . . we were good enough friends for that; though we still did not refer to my reasons for not emulating Larry's shining example held up to me. Breeding is a disadvantage sometimes, when vituperation might so effectively clear the air.

"Give Prue my love, and ask her to come to tea with me—and I promise to clear away all the lurid photographs from my mantelpiece!"

"I suppose she supposes it must be chorus-girls—and brokers," Felicity surmised. Then—"She's rather a dear . . ." a hint of remorse in the acknowledgment. "But I do wonder—" She fell silent,

musing. And, silent also, I was able to add my wonder to hers, by what seductions Prue could have drawn Larry the first for mate.

"Can you see her as a girl, Kevin?"

"Oh yes, easily. Mid-Victorian. Not the demure, swooning type, but lively, arch and amiable—with the sort of sleeves and ringlets that go with it. 'She rallied him in a sprightly tone '—that was Prue."

"She's very grey now," still with tenderness and remorse blended—and a hint of fear. "And when she buys a new hat, she wears it back to front, to disguise that she was ever married to an actor. I do love her for that! She's been good to me, Kevin . . . " her voice pleaded an excuse, lifted to a question unspoken: "Need I ever tell her?"

"It's beyond her range of guessing," I answered elliptically, standing at the leaded window with my back to the room. And—"Ask her to come next Saturday; when she can be practical about furniture and draughts to her heart's content."

Prue duly arrived, in the new hat still back to front, albeit jauntily put on, in honour of this rather immoral visit to an immoral bachelor's immoral apartments. She discovered immediately that my bed was aslant between door and window, and snapped my head off when I suggested that there was no other place for it.

"Bless the boy! What's wrong with *here?*"

Nothing at all. "Here" was where it had stood originally—only I had moved it to give Prue the

pleasure of putting it back. She dusted my books too, and tweaked my desk into a convenient place for the light; and made inquires about the porter and charwoman and window-cleaner; and did I know how to manage a geyser by myself? and the grates were a disgrace; and—"This cupboard's locked, Kevin," shaking at the door; "just like their impertinence! See that you get the key, and have it cleared out."

"It has a key—I mean—I knew it was locked . . . there's nothing in it," I stammered culpably. And Prue pursed up her lips—and chattered quickly and libellously about washerwomen.

There was no harm in encouraging Prue's pleasantly thrilled convictions that the secret of my mysterious follies lay all that afternoon within a few feet of her, in the locked cupboard; she was not fond enough of me to be grieved by the idea.

"Why Felicity doesn't lecture you, instead of gadding about! She's your mother. And you're no more fit to look after yourself——"

"Than she is."

Prue stirred her tea vigorously, scrutinized me from under the uncompromising back brim of her hat, and jerked her chair an inch or two nearer mine.

"You haven't been much at home these last years, Kevin, or I might have spoken my mind to you sooner —about Felicity."

"Well?" Instantly I sprang sentinel.

"That cottage of hers in Kent——"

Felicity had bought Thyme Croft about two or three years ago. The delicacy which prompted the purchase was natural—her own house was next door to Prue's. . . .

"She has never once invited me down there," the latter blurted out.

"Nor me."

Prue's hurt little face brightened. "How odd of Felicity!" She was relieved at not being singled out for special exclusion, but still worried over Felicity's motives.

"She probably thinks you wouldn't care to leave Wentworth," I blundered.

"My dear lad, I shouldn't; but Wentworth and Felicity get on capitally; and he'd have been only too delighted to come along and give her any sort of help in the management of her plants: I suppose she has plants down there?"

—And other things, the management of whom needed no help from Wentworth. Wentworth . . . I smiled at the notion of Larry's idyll Under Royal Patronage.

"No doubt I'm wrong in speaking to you like this, Kevin, as you're her son; but do you think Felicity is—being foolish at all?"

I negatived with brief haughtiness; sorry for the blatant lie—but loyalty cannot be bent in two directions. "She's admired, naturally; I should be the last to grumble at her social influence, string-pulling by charm—all that; it's not a bad start for me to be

devilling for Sir Harry Eyre. But entertaining so much in London, and being entertained, I expect she feels an after-the-season reaction, and the need of complete solitude."

Prue cheered up. "Dear me, yes, I know what it means myself; rushing about, and one's friends popping in and out, and the Sewing Club always at sixes and sevens, and my At Home day——"

Bless her innocent conceit, which saw in her own trotting, unselfish obscure existence "with one's friends popping in and out," the equivalent of Felicity's gracious spacious career as a Society Paragraph. But my joy in Prue was touched to irritation when she went on to say:

"It would do her good to remember, all the same, and I've told her often enough, that we're no chickens, she and I; and can't gallivant as we used to, without knocking ourselves up."

Her fuzzy grey hair and humorous eyes netted in tiny wrinkles, bore witness to it. And no wonder Felicity was galled, to be dragged along in Prue's thoughts, a contemporary as a matter of course. But to Prue, over fifty, Felicity, twelve years younger, figured only as the other woman whom Larry Munro had loved and would have married.

"You know I care a great deal about your mother, Kevin, and I'd hate her to be laid up this winter; but she *won't* wear wool next to her skin."

"She told me once that it was worth while being ill, having you to nurse her."

And Prue was soothed and gratified by the tribute, which, though diplomatic, was also genuine. "Oh, nonsense, I only run in and rub her chest, as any neighbour would!"

"You'll come in and rub mine if I'm ill, won't you, Prue? I don't want to be left to the thronging neighbours."

Prue's eyes were drawn irresistibly to the cupboard. "You've got—your mother."

"Not in there."

"Though she's hopeless in a sick-room, the poor darling. Do you remember that week after Miss Adams had left, when she gave you castor oil three times a day instead of cod-liver oil?"

We laughed in chorus over this one of Felicity's rare displays of maternal determination.

"That I lived through it, proves I was intended to be a great man."

"Oh, you're just ordinary," she chaffed me.

"And Larry, is he just ordinary too?"

She sighed. "He's so plain lately, Kevin—when did you last see him? We thought at one time he wasn't bad-looking; but now—" her eyes shone with pride in her son, even while her voice tapped him in depreciation, "not that it matters for a man. And he's doing well at his job; nothing out of the way, of course——"

"It's all right, my dear; I'm not Larry, and it won't unduly puff me up if you tell me to my face how wonderful he is."

After that she stayed another hour and a half, boring me. . . .

"For such an old-fashioned mite as you used to be, Kevin," on parting, "I must say you've grown a fine big fellow," her eyes ruminated on my length and breadth for a moment—and I waited for the long-delayed piece of sentiment or impulse of nearer confidence. At last—

"I *believe* you could manage my piano between you, you and Larry; it does bring such a lot of dirt and bother to have a man in for the job, and they do charge you such a lot nowadays; and grumble if they don't get their glass of beer. And the language! And then you have to thank them on your bended knees for ruining the stair-carpet. Wentworth doesn't like a piano in the dining-room, suddenly, after all these years, and wants it moved on to the first floor. If Oxford hasn't made you too proud——"

I kissed her puckered forehead, and reassured her that Oxford had taught me nothing but the profoundest humility—and that the piano should be moved forthwith.

[10]

Larry and I did not meet frequently within the next two years; he was engrossed in his work, and I in mine; and when we took recreation—well, I made it my care that it should be on different recreation grounds. Thanks to Lausanne and Oxford and the

Bar, this was apparently easy; my circle no longer intersected Larry's. And though I could not relax from the habit of spiking my fortresses, as of old, yet it really seemed as though my destiny, subservient to Larry-idolatry, had been spun free at last. Nevertheless, I vowed he should not know my friends, nor the friends of my friends; the familiar kick at my heels and jolt at my elbows might still urge me to a very frenzy for escape. So I guarded myself from intimacy with any of those luminaries of politics, diplomacy and art—Igg-liff, in fact, to use our schoolboy joke—whom I used to meet at Felicity's salon. It must be dubbed a salon; drawing-room conveys the wrong idea, over-emphasizes the diamond-and-low-neck aspect. Felicity's career as a hostess was of the kind which one day would form itself into the ideal volume of light biography: "Mrs. Somers and her Times, 25*s.* net." It held just the mellow unreality of an illustration filmed in tissue-paper, of such a book; Felicity had retained from the training of the Somers, an aversion from the hoyden manners and violent revolts of young twentieth-century; and they were never permitted to intrude.

I imagined Larry to be a favourite among Felicity's friends; but I had not the right to question him, while I strictly kept concealed from him what were my own intimate spheres. And he showed no curiosity; we might both have been conforming to the silent rules of an understood game—accidental on Larry's part, of course; he simply was not interested.

And gradually my precautions slackened from mistrustful tension; I ceased from teasing my brain with far-fetched possibilities of Larry breaking into this fortress or that, by means of chance encounter, chance introduction: the friend whose relation-by-marriage just happens to bring a fellow along to a studio rag one evening, who had an after-appointment with young Munro who called in to fetch him. . . .

Drivelling—yes! but often enough in the earlier stages of my panic, I had narrowly, by lie and by strategy, circumvented such catastrophe: Larry in my rooms, and the stray man who dropped in—it was our schoolboyhood all over again—breathless watching, while Larry all unconsciously walked into popularity. Had he not been so unconscious, had he only been aware of my existent state of mind, sharing it even, I could have said to him boldly: "No—don't stop on for another drink, at any moment Randolph and Payne and Willy Carter may arrive, and I can't turn them away, and they may like you, and invite you to call; and at the Paynes' you will inevitably meet the Setons and Rex Warrington-Crewe, and Leonora Barnet—and there you are . . . where I don't want you to be!"

But Larry would have thought me mad. I had to fake an engagement elsewhere, march him out of the house, use a public telephone to 'phone home to whoever might have arrived—by invitation or by accident—that I was detained and would return presently: then rid myself of Larry in the vicinity of my pre-

tended destination, eluding his frank and exasperating desire to accompany me, . . . and double back to Middle Inn Gardens!

It would have been less tortuous and more dignified, more decent, even, to have knifed affection ruthlessly; and on some pretext of quarrel, have parted with him for good. But—life without Larry? . . . My twin bogey of love and hate stalked me grimly, and gave me no rest, that first year I settled down in London. The second year, as I have said before, fear began to dwindle. I had averted all looming contingencies, and now they recurred less frequently. Larry himself was moody and depressed whenever I saw him —and it was only the conquering irresistible Larry who twanged the nerve of my obsession. What was the matter with him, and whence had departed the glory of early day that had hung about him before he was twenty? A woman might have wept over the change in Larry; perhaps two women did. And I—I wanted to do something for him; wanted to hear the old infectious whistle, which in the past had caused me to hate him furiously; and in the future, I knew, would make me hate him no less.

But this was not the sort of Larry I could fight with any credit. And so I let vigilance sag.

"Can you get away for a week's tramp, old man?"

I shook my head. "Eyre will want me for the Crown *v.* Durham, Ltd., case till the end of the month, anyway. I could clear off in May; in fact, I

was going down to Porthgollan, but I'd rather put in the time with you."

"Who's at Porthgollan?"

"Kate Seton has a cottage there. Calls it The Shoe —always has so many people in it she doesn't know what to do sort of idea. She's a novelist, and bound over by the public to be strictly original."

Idly Larry strolled over to my book-shelves. "K. B. Seton—is that the woman? Is her stuff any good?"

"Borrow a couple, if you like, and find out for yourself. She gave me *that*"—indicating a recent acquisition.

"My lamb!" Larry apostrophized the bull-pup affectionately; a low, vindictive growl was the response. "My fairy! Doesn't answer to either of these titles. Hi! Baskerville!"—and a red snap from eyes deep-set in festoons of loose baggy flesh.

"He's annoyed at being called out of his name, that's all. Potter!"

Potter's one enormous fang, worn decoratively outside his face, ceased to be threatening. Almost, he smiled on his master.

"Little Playmates!" remarked Larry rudely, for he was accustomed to the worship of dogs. "Potter is very much in this picture, Kev: the Lonely Little Boy, and: 'At least, dear old doggie, *you* love me, don't you?' And you've both got the same pleading, melting, liquid, brown eyes."

"Like butterscotch in its different stages of manufacture—yes. Potter isn't at all the sort of footling character you describe; when he and I feel misanthropic, we sit and growl at one another. But look here, Larry, I'm not a bit keen on Porthgollan—will you be able to manage the second week in May for a tramp?"

"Dunno; I'll try;" his brief spell of enthusiasm for the projected holiday had already subsided to apathy.

Had Felicity done this to him? Was his dejection the result of her favour withdrawn? Felicity was radiantly capricious, I knew . . . but never yet to Larry Munro.

A subtle aversion turned me from going to see her, and thus solving the riddle. Hitherto I had believed Felicity capable of one passion, translucent and fixed. That its object had died and been re-embodied was no contradiction to her loyalty. But if now she had grown sick of Larry. . . .

I ought to have been glad of the possibility—God! I had hated him enough, and twice over. Nevertheless and curiously, I could probe to the very core of my wound, and find there a speck of comfort in recognition of the manifest scheme and purpose of the two women absorbed in the one type . . . wife and wife —for in all but the consummation, Felicity had been wedded to Larry the first; mother and lover . . . the rhythm lilted on—and I, the outcast, foredoomed. But the resentment of vision could never be bitter as

of those blindly thwarted and pushed out. An artist had here planned perfection. And I, as an artist in appreciation, was appalled at the thought that Felicity's disloyalty was bound to destroy my sense of an ordered grouping—turn my isolation into senseless, cruel accident. . . .

So I did not go to her.

[11]

Through the dense breath of the Café Royal—the long, low room with the kiosk of foreign newspapers on the threshold—I caught a sudden glimpse of Larry at a table not far off. He was pale, and his eyes glittered scornfully, scorn that might have been directed against himself, or at me, or—who was with him?

A plump, intervening shoulder, twisting and shrugging coyly among a group of male satellites, entirely blocked out his companion from my range of vision. I, too, twisted and shrugged in opposition till I could see what I wanted. Felicity? No, a flapper; a child of about sixteen, common and pretty; face smothered lavishly in powder; baby lips over-red but parted in fresh surprise at something Larry had just bent to whisper into her mop of dark curls; crimson satin tammy; beads . . .

Oh *Lord!*

She nudged him, and giggled loudly—"You *are* a one! Let's get a move on now; I wouldn't miss

Beattie and Babs for worlds, I wouldn't; and their turn is billed for ten-fifteen."

They passed our table on their way out. Larry nodded to me, the corners of his mouth jauntily tilted.

"Hurry up," I admonished him, "or you'll miss Beattie and Babs"—the flapper was already at the door, her high black patent boots twinkling from beneath the flare and toss of her short skirt.

"I wouldn't for *worlds*," said Larry, very seriously; and followed the lure of the boots.

"That was Munro, wasn't it?" asked one of the men at my table; "son of the notorious Larry. He's in the works with Blake Fenton. Awful young slacker, Fenton says, and no wonder, considering what he goes about with. I didn't know you knew him, Somers."

"We were at Runchester together," I replied evasively.

I sat up late for Larry that night, oddly positive of his appearance in my rooms.

"Give me a drink, Kev!"

"Two, if you like."

"D'you mean that? I was afraid you'd try and influence me for my good, after the look you gave me to-night." He flung himself into a saddle-bag.

"Your mistake. That was congratulation and best wishes."

"Damn your sarcasm . . . Kev, she was *young*, that's all!"

I understood—that this was a knell.

"What about Felicity?" and I was glad now that I had always called her so; that there was no need for me to say: "What about my mother?"

"Felicity—" he stared before him, avoiding my eyes. "Well—she's forty-one, and I'm twenty-five."

"Try not to be a cad."

A knell . . . cracked . . . discordant . . . my ears were still full of the sound.

Larry sprang up; stood with arms outflung, gripping at the table behind him.

"Am I less of a cad if I lie about it? I'm going to her to-morrow—yes, to-morrow morning . . . to tell her. It's only fair. I don't want to be furtive. Kevin, I can't stand it any longer!—No, it isn't that kid—Heavens, no! Don't care if I never see her again; that was only a rag! It isn't any one. It's just that Felicity has worn me out . . . seven years of it . . . what did I know, when I was eighteen, of how I should feel at twenty-five? For those seven years—I swear it—she's had the best of me, unshared; but I want—oh, I don't know what I want!" with a plunge back into despondency. "But I'm going to Felicity to-morrow."

Well . . . his desire was crudely obvious enough, symbolized in his reaction to that flapper. He wanted youth, youth, youth—the sap and spring of it; the pace of youth alongside of his own, and its plangent,

mooning quality. He wanted to teach, not learn; to be masterful, not submissive; to be shocked, not finessed. He wanted his mate. . . . I could not but acknowledge that it argued a passionate sincerity in him, that he was ready to renounce Felicity for the mere romantic idea, before ever it materialized into beloved form.

"So you propose telling her——"

"That I respect and honour her more than anybody else I know, but——"

Larry was interrupted by my uncontrollable shout of laughter. I could not help myself.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Go on. That you respect and honour her more than anybody else you know, but——?"

"I don't see what you're laughing at," sulkily.

"At your pretty, chivalrous reassurances, that's all. Confound you, Larry! even you can't seriously intend to insult her by that sort of tosh?"

Larry presented to me a blank chubbiness: "There's no insult and no tosh in telling a woman that you respect her. I won't have her imagine that I'm chucking her away like a frayed glove."

"You're not, of course."

"I was mad about her in my teens. But where's the callow young ass who wouldn't have been? Why, she was there, *waiting*, almost before I was ready to have any one waiting for me, who would have expected less; so where was my chance?" incoherently.

Heir, unconsciously, to a demand created by the first Larry Munro—yes, Felicity's parched exactions must have been overwhelmingly too much for eighteen-and-a-half.

"All right, all right," I granted him. "You've been kidnapped, ensnared, sirened, harpied and harpooned, with all the stock seasoning. Even then, *you're* coming out sound and happy, aren't you?"

"If only I were," he muttered. "One wrench—and wholly boy again. . . . But I've left a bit of me hanging like a rag on a bramble-bush. I'm twenty-five, Kevin; and if I don't revolt now—well, I never shall! I shall grow—lazy. D'you think my common clay isn't aware that Felicity has solved a common-clay problem for me, all these years?—Ah!" he winced backwards, involuntarily; then his gloom burst into a puckish grin: "I say, remember when we were kids and you flew at me once like a young savage?"

I had not supposed him so perceptive. "Why mention it now?"

"I thought you were going to do it again, a second ago. Kev," with a grave simplicity that was disconcerting, "I do so want a girl whom I can bring home to the mater—I've felt a swine towards her."

I groaned impatiently.

"Hang it—the mater *does* exist."

"Not more now than seven years ago."

"I don't see why I'm justifying myself to you," he flared.

"You're not. Far from it. So don't worry."

Larry stormed up and down the room in his wrath! "Man—there's wonder for me at the end of the world —would you have me miss it? . . . A sort of promise—because I'm rather wonderful myself!"—He jerked back his head, while he swung and flaunted, as a blade from its sheath, his confidence in a special grant of divinity. Then, ashamed in the old, familiar Larry-fashion, began absurdly outboasting his own boast, to make me believe its reality to have been meant for sheer, vapid nonsense.

I was reminded of the Greek Peleus who had held Thetis in his hand—"though she changed her shape seven times. For she changed, as I held her, into water, and to vapour, and to burning flame, and to a rock, and to a black-maned lion, and to a tall and stately tree"—Larry, in the past half-hour, had twisted through the stages of ingenuous schoolboy, man of the world, almost a brute, entirely a fool, a less than human goblin, a more than human god, a braggart, a poet—I had never remotely suspected this last in Larry; but surely he was a poet who lamented that he could not escape from enchanted ground without the sacrifice of a fragment of his impetuous youth —"left hanging like a rag on a bramble-bush."

"Felicity——"

I became attentive again. What was he raving about, dreaming about, now?

"Felicity is unique; a thousand times too good for me—and too much for me. When I gabble rot, she

can smile that absent, mournful, teasing smile of hers, which simply shuts me up, because it means that she's probed so much deeper than I, has learnt wisdom and tolerance years and years ago, loves my rash, idiotic, infantile judgments—and it shut me up and it maddens me, Kev, for the girl who'd be intolerant and idiotic *with* me. . . . Oh, that girl!—you know . . . the one who doesn't exist—she'd pick up sticks in a wood, a damp, mushy wood with most of the red leaves blown down, and help a fellow to get a fire burning under a gipsy tripod."

"So would a Boy Scout," I snubbed his ardours.

"And Felicity would trail about among the tree-stems, in exquisitely inappropriate clothes, scattering exquisitely inappropriate remarks—till suddenly she'd look forlorn as a star reflected in a puddle, and ask to be escorted home. The girl would never want to go home; she'd want to go on!" he rang out, triumphant as though she were a fact instead of ether.

"I'm sick of you. Go and find her, then."

"How can I?" He hauled himself slowly to his feet, and stood with bowed shoulders, a maimed look about him, as of a man who has just remembered he is heavily burdened. "After tomorrow morning"—he shrugged.

"Wait till the evening," I entreated him suddenly.

"Why on earth—oh, cut the cheap sentiment, Kev."

Nightmare by early day! . . . By night one was strung up to expect all that was sinister and macabre;

but nightmare by day gained all the contrasting horror of normal surroundings.

"Good night, old man, and thanks for being a pillow to my troubles; I'll perjure myself by saying it wasn't at all like rubbing one's cheek confidingly against sandpaper."

"And I won't perjure myself by saying it was over-good taste to select me as your confidant. Under the circumstances, I'm not the right person."

"Can't help that," said Larry coolly; "you're the only person, you see."

His feet pattered down the stone steps, thudded to a leap at the bottom—God! how could he? But I allowed myself one throb of gladness for what he had last said . . . before I began to think of Felicity.

[12]

But perhaps she would have need of me now. Felicity was one of those who reached for human aid in a crisis of suffering; I had seen her cling to Prue when they lost Larry the first. But this time the solace of Prue was, of necessity, denied. And: "I'm her son—her *own* son!" the old tag which I had deemed limp and devitalized, beat its measure again all through the next morning, while I knew Larry to be destroying her . . . destroying her . . . and assuring her of his continued reverence.

In the afternoon I went.

"Oh, you, Kev!—it's so good of you to come; you know I'm At Home now on second and fourth Tuesdays. You've just missed Magdalen Ralli, conveying more obviously than ever that her looks were burnt out by passion and not fretted out by time—that's what she plays for you to say, of course! I'm expecting quite a crowd this afternoon."

She was wandering to and fro in the drawing-room, her heels tapping the parquet, her hand now among the fragile tea-cups, now straightening a miniature on the wall. She wore a sprigged muslin frock, and corals; her hair, with its softening pallor of silver on the gold, piled in high, loose curls. She motioned me to a chair, and strove to keep me entertained as though I were a visitor; handed me my tea-cup, and said, "Here's rue for you—and here's some for me." . . . No, her eyes only, in their stricken clouded blue, sounded Ophelia's plaint to my fancy, as I sat and cursed Larry—"Milk and sugar, Kevin? I forget. . . ."

(". . . I would give you the violets, but they withered all when my father died. . . .")

So he had been that morning. I wondered dispassionately if I would have done better to have murdered him last night in my rooms—before Felicity put on that girlish little muslin frock and the corals, to receive him. Or had she changed into this attire for some distraught reason unknown to the world beyond her sorrow, after he had left? For me,

those dangling corals were part of the nightmare.

She went on gaily: "I'm expecting—let me see . . . oh, Lord Chambercombe nearly always comes; and Mrs. Kildare and her daughter—poor thing, she *can't* remember she has married a millionaire, and will order things that are in season for her dinner-parties! And—do you know Nina Barclay? And probably Norway Reade, the sculptor; and little Etienne to meet him—I've promised the introduction; it's such a help to beginners. Or was it Lord Chambercombe he was so anxious to know, because of a constituency somewhere—it couldn't be, though, as he's a Frenchman; one's friends are so confusing, and yet it seems ungracious to shut oneself away from them. Weren't you once rather taken with Nina Barclay, Kevin? She's engaged to the dramatic critic on 'The Roundabout.' "

"Not a very good match for her, then; they never have dramatic criticism on 'The Roundabout'!" . . . I had not the remotest notion what I was talking about. If only she would sit still, not keep moving the empty chairs a few inches to the right or left. I was glad nobody arrived to occupy the chairs, and yet. . . .

"I hate a crowd," she repeated fretfully. "Larry was here this morning, but he won't come to my afternoons—somebody bores him, and then he gets cross, like all men. Have you seen this little thing I did of Larry? I do think I've caught him rather well." . . .

I glowered in silence at the bust of Larry's head and shoulders, on which her preoccupied hand was for a moment resting in caress—it was the identical one of eight years ago, when she had made fatal discovery of Larry the first in Larry the second.

"Larrikin is so like him," she whispered. "Look, Kev—isn't it ridiculous?" She slid open a drawer in the Vernet-Martin bureau, and passed me a photograph.

Larry. About four years old. And beside him a girl of the same age, with a shock of thick fair hair falling over a farouche little face. That puzzled me.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Larrikin."

"Yes, I know. But the girl?"

The tenderness in her voice faded to indifference. "Yo; his twin. I named her Yolande after your aunt who died in India in some terribly hot station in the hills—or it may have been because it wasn't in the hills, that she died—Kipling muddles one so about India."

But I was still intent on the photograph. A giant fist had clenched somewhere inside me . . . knuckles white with the contraction. . . . I waited for it to relax.

"Felicity——"

"Miss Beech. Miss Hilda Beech."

Felicity swayed down the room to receive her visitors. They were the only ones who came that afternoon; two gawky, hoydenish girls, rather over-

powered by Felicity from the outset; quite superfluous girls.

But what had become of the brilliant "set" who used to gather round Felicity Somers as a matter of course? Had her moon waned? Had the celebrities tired of her increasing vagueness and sweet gracious inconsequence? This special afternoon, barren and dreary, seemed too poignantly in keeping with the situation overhanging it, to be mere accident. . . . Miss Beech and Miss Hilda Beech giggling, "Yes—oh, yes!" Was Felicity entertaining them as she had "entertained" me?—or else a phantom company sitting about in the empty chairs? Her manner of setting those girls at ease was perfect as ever; her epigrams as pungent; her scandal ripe, but not too ripe. Miss Beech and Miss Hilda Beech were not worth the effort squandered on them; but she contrived that they should leave, feeling, I know, that they had gone down well with their hostess; been, in short, a tremendous success.

Felicity informally saw them down the steps to the front garden gate; she had forgotten to ring for Murray. I watched her from the open window, the photograph still in my hand. Hilda Beech remarked on the beauty of the wistaria, and Felicity raised her arm, leaning back to pull down a branch of it for the girl to pluck. . . . It must have been a pretty pose when she had originated it a few years ago—in just such another sprigged muslin, and the sun on her golden hair. Why did I know so certainly that

it was only Felicity's wraith picking the spray for a wraith who had just quitted a crowded salon? . . .

"Good-bye! good-bye! Do come again!" She bent a little forward from the gate, as though with that anxious, pleading smile she were watching her own charm, not quite sure of it in the transit. . . .

She came back to me in the drawing-room. "Dear girls! I'm so fond of them both. I thought they were never going."

"Felicity,"—I stopped, fought for mastery over that cramping cold fist—"Felicity, is this Larry's son?"

"Larry's son—and mine." She took the photograph away from me, pored over it lovingly . . . her look was a cradle song.

Something in my silence must have recalled her to the fact that I had received a shock.

"You didn't know, Kevin? No, of course not; we had to keep it from Prue," however blank to her own egoism in scooping up the glory of Larry's youth, however obtuse to my point of view, when she spoke of Prue, compunction, shame even, always crept into her tone. "They are at school near Hythe, and at Thyme Croft in the holidays. Larry would never let me tell you, though I can't see why—it doesn't make any difference to you. And now——"

The unspoken reference at last. And I answered: "Larry was with me last night. You'll be going down to Thyme Croft tomorrow, I suppose?"

"Today."

("I'm her own son—Larry can never be her son, like I am!" The old refrain still jigged and jeered in my brain. . . . Felicity had an own son, and his name was Larry, and his face was Larry's.)

"Do you want me to take you down?"

"Oh no," lightly; "I'm quite independent."

"Then good-bye." As we stood in the doorway I suddenly felt her become definitely aware of my height and breadth of shoulder; aware of me as a son grown up. The old longing to shield her from heartbreak, to encircle her bruised spirit strongly, to dedicate my manhood in her service, swept over me like a great wave. . . . Was she going to say, like Prue: "What a fine big fellow you are, Kevin!" and ask me to move pianos for her?

Oh, my dear, my dear, that—and how much more, gladly!

"What a big fellow you are, Kevin!" She paused. "Perhaps . . . if I had not had a son—of his own age—even taller than he is . . . he might not have noticed—so soon——"

I took the midnight express to Porthgollan that same evening.

[13]

There, at the farthest end of England, where nobody knew of Larry Munro, might be reprieve for me . . . a short reprieve only. Down the past, as

far as memory could travel, was Larry; and into the future, as far as vision could peer, Larry; and he encompassed my present like a winding-sheet. There was no real escape. But just for a little while—to forget that Felicity had said it was my fault Larry had told her she was henceforth to be revered, not desired. . . .

Not three Larrys, but one. Not one, but a thousand . . . dynasty without end, clutching at the love that was due to me, at the motherhood due to me, and the warmth and space due to me.

For that journey I had ceased to be ironically resigned, as of yore, to the impish fatality which pressed me up against a dynasty. I had just learnt there was a third of the dynasty, and I rebelled.

Jealous of him? I *was* jealousy! The incarnate figure of it, hunted and malignant . . . my brain a warren where the morbid burrowing thoughts swarmed like dark little animals in and out of their numberless dark little holes.

But a journey west, by night, is a blessed healing thing. It lulls by its very rock and rhythm—and then wakes a sense of bold magic that closes barrier-high at the rear of the train, shutting off backward vistas.

Larry Munro. . . . Larry Munro. . . . Drowsier now. . . . A boy not yet twenty, with quicksilver in his heels and mischief in his eyes, and the urge for free adventure tugging at his spirit.

Father of two children. A boy not yet twenty.

Even now at twenty-five it rang unspeakably sad. One sees a young bridegroom merged by degrees into the young husband and the young parent—the official stages find expectation prepared. But to me it seemed as though Larry had been maimed in his fleetness, robbed of his adventure, and hung about his neck with a burdensome "for ever," all in that one smiting second of realization when I held the photograph of his children in my hands. Poor old fellow. . . . Poor old Larry. . . .

Larry Munro. . . . Larry Munro. . . . Drowsier still . . . by the time the dawn broke, and Devon's flare of colour waved like a flag beyond my carriage window, I was able to dissociate my ego from the Larry-saga, and marvel once more at the friendship between Felicity and Prue, as though it were a thing of long ago, dimmed and frosted to legend. . . .

PART II—BROKEN CHINA

[1]

BARBARA SETON and a very primitive pony-cart met me at St. Catts, the nearest station for Porthgollan. Her manner was alternately confidential and embarrassed; I learnt afterwards that she had impulsively claimed to be the one to drive in and fetch the strange young man, and had wished all the way she had not been such a little fool. . . . Barbara was seventeen, and had only just left school.

"Would you rather I took you home by the hill or by the nine gates?" she asked, as we drove off.

"Is there a catch in it?" doubtfully. "Because I'm not very bright after a night in the train."

She laughed. "Yes, there is a catch in it; you'd have to get down nine times and open the gates."

"By the hill then, please."

"It's just exactly as you like, of course," with a sudden, solemn politeness. Later on, I learnt these lapses were typical of all the Setons, nipping you just when you took for granted a happy state of familiar intimacy.

"The pony always falls on his knees halfway down the hill—I hope you won't mind awfully."

"Halfway down a hill isn't my hour for morning

prayers, but I'll follow the example of any really serious-minded pony!"

Barbara pondered for several minutes on the general possibilities in my demeanour—it is difficult to look Spanish and languorous in a bumping cart four feet by six, containing two persons, a suit case, and numerous nobbly parcels; but evidently I achieved this effect, for she said firmly: "We'll go home by the gates," risking no emergencies before my worth was proven.

"I say, I hope you won't mind awfully"—every second phrase contained the gauche apology, "but I've got to wait outside the apothecary's till the 8.45 has started, and get embrocation and lead shot for Ned."

I rubbed my eyes contentedly, and asked if I might light a pipe. Porthgollan was so far away from everywhere, and Barbara was so pretty, and it was early morning with bits of sea stabbing in vivid blue slits and triangles and patches at all the remoter points of the landscape, with no respect for geography . . . and I liked the bit about the apothecary.

"Go on. Why does the apothecary lead a double life?"

"He's the signal-man," laughed Barbara, drawing up outside his shop. "And every afternoon when there are no trains in and out, is early closing day here—except Thursdays and Saturdays. It's a *terribly* difficult village to manage. The butcher only kills on Wednesdays, so he's open on a Thursday; and the baker is never open before 2 P. M. And

General Stores are just a joke, because they're never opened at all—they went smash directly after they had the name painted up. Only, of course, strangers don't know that, and hang about. . . ."

She paused, breathless. She had me under deep-set observation, eager to hail me as "all right" by hockey-field standard of measurement; my arrival was obviously a shy excitement to the child to whom leisure had hitherto only meant holidays. Barbara was so delightfully just-left-school.

"What does the post-office do in the comic line? There are enormous possibilities in a post-office."

"It doesn't do *very* much—only keeps shut until twenty minutes after the one-outgoing-post-a-day has gone out, so that you can't stamp your letters unless you've done it the day before. And they send telegrams up as a sort of a favour, only if they like you. They adore mother, or we shouldn't have had yours last night."

"I should hate to be dependent on the affections of the post-office to get the news of my father's death, or not."

"Oh—is he ill?" Barbara looked startled and apprehensive.

"Dead."

"Well, then it doesn't matter . . ." she began—and bit her lip, crimsoning; to cover her lapse she plunged breathlessly into further accounts of Porthgollan and its eccentricities:

"D'you hear that bell? They ring the same one

for muffins and church, so that we never know if it's tea-time or Sunday—mother put it like that in one of her books," she admitted frankly; "I suppose I ought to tell you?"

I nodded: "Yes, I remember it. It's in 'The Square Peg.'"

"Are you going to remember *all* mother's quotations?" disgustedly. "Because they've got well mixed up in the language—*our* private home language, you know. And a few of them were Ned's and Micky's and mine to begin with, so it wouldn't be fair to think we were cribbing. Here *is* Mr. Cragge," with a sigh of relief, as the apothecary ambled up from the tiny station which was the terminus of the branch line.

Soon we were jogging between hedges that were walls—or walls that were hedges—I was not sure which, with the sea gleaming between the feathery green of the tamarisks.

"I say, I hope you won't mind awfully—but Ned does revolver practice. I expect he'll get tired of it in a week or two," consolingly.

"Does he give exact warning at what hour and in what place he intends to do revolver practice?"

"Oh no; he does it just when and where he feels inclined. Mother doesn't mind, but Henry is a bit nervous. Henry is our father. Are you nervous?"

"I shall probably do a bit of revolver practice

myself, when I feel inclined," I assured her carelessly. "What's this coming?"

"This" was a piercing cry of "Mack'rel! fi' mack'rel!" from an approaching cart. Barbara immediately pulled up and bought a large quantity of fish. It was quite in keeping with the character of Porthgollan, that the wag who cried "Mack'rel" should have only sprats for sale. And equally so that the milkman whom we passed a few moments later, should sing out cheerily that his grandmother would consent to do the washing for Mrs. Seton that week, as the weather was fine.

"Once upon a time," I related to Barbara, "there was a village idiot without a village. And he felt very forlorn. So he fell asleep and dreamt a village and lived happy in it ever after. And it happened to be Porthgollan."

Barbara liked this. And I liked Barbara. We were excellent friends when we sighted Micky a-swing on the gate of the grey stone cottage called The Shoe. It was a good world . . . and I had assuredly left Larry Munro behind me.

[2]

I had met Micky before, so his carefully formal greeting and well-nigh angel beauty did not decieve me in the slightest; being aware that his thirteen years were as crammed full of wickedness as it was

healthy for them to be, and that his only skyward disposition was in his nose and thick black lashes. His eyes were bluer than Barbara's, and his skin's original fairness dazzled through the brown bloom with which Cornwall had lightly washed it. And his hair was a million tiny tips of gold. . . . And as though all this were not enough, his mother who adored him, had firmly pronounced him Psychic—poor Micky!

Kate Seton, who now appeared from the house, her bare, brown feet sturdily defying the purple plush tea-gown arrangement she wore, had this disconcerting habit of making leaps in psychology which landed her on the wrong side of nowhere. . . . Sometimes she suffered herself to be gently led back to the place from whence she started. Usually she could not be budged. Thus I knew from previous conversation with her that Micky alliteratively was a Mystic; that Barbara had the Maternal Instinct; that Ned, a year younger than Barbara, was an Artist . . . or was it a Pagan?—I forget. Kate's husband, an amiable but futile person called Henry, she had irrevocably set down as a Decadent. She ran the four along these lines, sternly resisting their slightest attemps at deviation; and as in all other respects she was a kindly, humorous woman, sensible and energetic, the household prospered. Curiously, in her novels her psychology was unerring. Some divine instinct seemed to guide her wobbliness, and then meanly forsake her the instant the pen was laid aside.

I had had my label affixed two years ago. "Misunderstood" was scrawled upon it, in Mrs. Seton's squarest caligraphy. I read "Misunderstood" beaming in pity from both her eyes, as she welcomed me to The Shoe. Such assumptions are infectious. . . . I began to feel Misunderstood all over.

"Good boy, to have come. You want breakfast, of course. No, don't bother to wash, or wash at the pump. You hadn't seen Babs before, had you? She *would* meet you—oh, I'm sorry, my dear," at Barbara's scowl of agony; "better help your father and Ned with the beds till your face cools off. Come along, Kevin. Micky, go and pick snails for Lulu."

"Lulu's the pig," Micky explained to me kindly. Barbara had flown to the far end of the lawn, where two males were apparently cavorting in the blanket-trot and the bolster-roll. "Are you going to open the strawberry jam for Kevin, mother?"

"Yes—for *Kevin*," emphatically.

Micky, in simple friendliness, slipped his arm into mine, and we all three entered the kitchen, which was also the living-room.

"Do you want to sleep out in the garden with us, or indoors, Kevin? Because if out, they must put you up an extra bed."

Micky said ruminatively: "I believe Barbara would kick at that." And Mrs. Seton and I exchanged a perturbed smile.

"My son—go forth and pick snails."

"But, mother. . . ."

"My son, I have spoken."

"Mother, *mayn't* I sleep indoors if it rains tonight?"

"No—nor any other night. You know what the doctor said."

"Mother"—Micky was almost crying now—"am I *never* to sleep in a bed again?"

"Good heavens, don't I always sacrifice myself on the other bunk? How many mothers, do you suppose, would sleep in a pig-sty, at my age, just to keep you company?"

"If I slept *on* a bed, *in* a room *with* a roof," Micky wheedled, "you wouldn't have to."

"I dare say. Go and pick snails."

Micky departed, murmuring anarchy and revolution.

"I shall put the case to the S.P.C.C.," I warned her.

"Micky isn't as strong as he should be. . . ." For one moment she was all mother. Then, confidentially, "I ought to have remembered about Barbara—before Micky reminded me. All the footling little things one has to take into account with a grown-up daughter about; and she flushes and flares into tempers, and accuses me of telling her too little . . . or too much—and runs away for the day, and upsets herself over nothing, and goes dancing mad with infectious high spirits when I want to shut myself up and work; and says 'Mother, how *can* you!' horrified over my most innocent habits of years—I shan't be natural or happy again till I get her married. . . .

K. B. Seton fixed me broodingly—they all had this deep-set grey-blue scrutiny—waited a few moments that no possible suspicion could connect her next speech with her last; and then said: "Do you like Barbara?"

"In Barbara's name I say, 'Mother, how *can* you?' " I countered, champion in Barbara's cause. If Kate behaved with this naïve candor to every eligible who entered the house, I could understand that the girl had rolled herself up into a ball of sensitive thorns.

"Too soon. . . . Have some more coffee? Don't scowl at me, Kevin, I've got a lot to put up with. I'm a novelist and a mother of stalwart sons. That's all I can manage. I'd forgotten Barbara. . . . She used to go to her school-friends for most of her holidays. And then I'd reckoned she might be a genius, and I've begged her to beg me to send her for three years to the Conservatoire in Paris or to Montmartre or Dresden, or any of those convenient places where art and music can be studied——"

"And every one would praise your sacrifice in your little daughter's interests. Won't Barbara oblige with a single talent?"

"She's just a nice, normal girl of seventeen who wants to be given a good time," said Kate Seton in quiet desperation. "I'd have coped gallantly with a wild, inspired daughter. . . . I'd have understood her subtle needs and strange fancies as few mothers could—in fact, I *meant* to be a mother to that sort

of thing. But the nice, normal girl is well beyond me. I can't even *write* about them. . . . She's a dear, sweet child, and very fond of me, and comes to me for guidance, and when I give it to her wrong, she puts me right. It seems I'm all wrong in my morals and my outlook and my tolerances—oh, Barbara knows; Barbara knows *for certain.* She knows that good's good and bad's bad." The psychological novelist sought my compassion at such a state of things.

"I'm worried, Kevin. I'm blighted. How long is it to go on? In the interests of English literature, ought she to be allowed to play about spoiling an excellent novel in the making?—*my* making. And she's chockful of maternal instinct"—I was waiting for this—"super-developed. Her job is mothering a brood, and then she'd stop brooding over a mother ——" Another hopeful pause to allow me to make formal proposal for Barbara's hand.

"It's better to let an excellent novel be spoilt than a girl's playtime," I said, pedantically; and helped myself to cream and hot splits and honeycomb—a conjunction of happiness to be recommended.

"Umph! Are you still unhappy at home?"

"I haven't been living at home for two years."

She paused. "And you've never told me. Why?"

"You can't extort confidences with a bludgeon, Kate dear." We were quite intimate friends, she and I.

She stood up, putting both her hands on my shoul-

ders. Her shrewd little eyes were full of affection. "Has your mother ever loved you as she ought to, Kevin?"

I thrust aside the prig's halo tendered for my wear.

"Felicity has always been very polite and pleasant to me."

"Of all things that most exasperate me, reserve and discretion are the worst," said Kate, frankly. "They're such silly qualities. Here have I been laying bare my very soul to you, and if you'd only do the same to me, everything would be jolly and easy all round!"

"If there were no taciturnities and withholdings, K. B. Seton, and everything were jolly and easy all round, what would you write your novels about?"

"I'm not going to argue with you. You've been very unsympathetic. Go and be taciturn with Barbara—*her* soul is full of these little nun's gardens —you'll be a nice, spontaneous pair. Oh, here comes Ned—he'll take you out and try to kill you, while I finish off Part II. of my new book."

I discovered that Ned Seton's way of entertaining family and guests was on a system of: "Bet you can't do this!" On to the recurring phrase we were all perilously suspended. Ned risked his life cheerfully ninety times a day, saying: "Bet you can't do this!"

Of the entertainment proffered by the three young Setons while their mother finished Part II., Micky's was to be preferred as the most mature. Babs still

shied away from me, with the merest intervals of impulsive friendship—perhaps she suspected that "mother had been *awful* again," in conversation with me. It was Micky who conscientiously showed me the bathing-pool, and the view from the headland, and the smuggler's cave, and the ruins of the altar of St. Constantine, all the stock ruggedness of the wild Cornish coast, which must be endured and got over before one can begin to discover for oneself the innate friendliness or ferocity of the place; it was Micky who, letting Ned plunge on wildly ahead shouting his monotonous challenge, turned from rock to rock to see if I were close behind, and gravely offered me the help of his hand. "There's rather a difficult place here. I think if we went round *that* way, and put your *other* foot on *this* little bit. Mind the seaweed —it's the slippery sort!"

"Micky," at last; "honestly, d'you know, I may be a bit weak and tottery, with St. Vitus' dance from birth, and I haven't got my sea-legs yet, and my heart is diseased, and my lungs both rotten, and I'm liable to vertigo at any moment, and my nerves, of course, are in bits—but I'm not *absolutely* senile."

Micky threw me a gleam of mischievous comprehension; "Ned has laid up most of our visitors," he explained. "It doesn't matter with our own friends; they can look after themselves, but you belong to mother's lot; I mean you knew her before you knew us."

"That proves nothing," I argued, knowing well

that in Micky's sight it put me a generation wrong.

He sat down in a shallow pool, and put both his hands about his knees. "It's astounded me in a way, that you should be able to be any sort of a companion to her—because mother's pretty old and pretty intelligent."

I felt it was time I did something drastic in Micky's sight; just then Ned halloed from halfway up a beetling cliff—at least a cliff which offered no apparent footholds whatever, and also slanted the wrong way, which I take to be the essentials of "beetling."

"Bet you can't do this!"

I did it.

Micky accepted the reproof like a cherub. And we came shouting and pummelling home, wet and torn, and covered in slime and sand, a trio of idiot good fellowship.

"I don't want to be considered; pray don't consider me, I'm nobody, nobody at all in this household. Who am I—? Don't take the slightest notice of me. . . ." Henry Seton entered late for the meal, his white hair in a brush of perturbation.

"No, Henry, we don't; you shan't be; we're not," his wife soothed him. "Would you like the wishing-bone, Micky?"

Mr. Seton burst out: "If you *want* to know, the sheep are in the meadow, and the pigs in the corn!"

"Little Boy Blue, come blow up your son . . ." retorted Kate. "*He* pulled down the tamarisk

boughs we laid across the gap in the hedge this morning, and didn't stop to put them back."

"It was for Kevin to get through," lied Micky. "You told me to look after him, mother."

"Yes, it was for me to get through," I upheld him. "And he looked after me like a Matthew, Mark, Luke, *and* John!"

Micky twinkled me his gratitude. Barbara, sturdily practical, had already darted out of doors to cope with the rampaging animals. I joined her. The sheep were easily enough diverted back into their proper sphere; but Lulu, excited no doubt by her recent demolishment of a whole two-pound jam-pot full of snails, performed a clumsy and intoxicated saraband among the green, sunlit corn, defying Barbara, who with a short stick in her hand, and her long, light brown hair blown straightly out by the sea-wind, reminded me irresistibly of an illustration to Andersen's Fairy Tales. The goose-girl—the swine-herd's daughter . . . her graceful ankles and arms were bare; her attention was completely absorbed by the big black pig. "Head her off to the gap, Kevin!" as it lunged in my direction.

I caught Lulu in my arms. Lulu was astonished. So was I. "There you are, little lady!" Barbara helped me lace the gap anew with branches.

We returned triumphantly to The Shoe, rather inclined to preen ourselves on our achievement. Also and inasmuch as any ridiculous experience shared promoted friendship far swifter than tragedy

or peril, we returned a hundred degrees more intimate than when we had rushed forth.

"Barbara," I whispered hurriedly at the gate, "don't leave me to Micky this afternoon. Please don't. I'm tired of being cherished. Let's run away together."

[3]

And a few hours later found us alone on a triangular pinnacle of rock, out-jutting between two narrow bays of stealthy, sombre-green water, which pushed silently and relentlessly into the rounded archway of the cave yawning far back into the cliff. In contrast to the swimming coolness below and surrounding us, our rock island, for it was so slightly joined to the mainland by a dizzy six-inch causeway as to be almost imperceptible once crossed, was tilted boldly up as though to attract every arrow of sun that slanted eastward across the Atlantic. Barbara lay prone among the cushions and knolls and tufts of sea-thrift, her neck and arms plunged deep in the bright pink pungently-scented flower, her eyes dreaming out to a tiny russet sail.

"This is the Dead Kings' Burial-ground," she said at last.

"What is?"

"The mound we're lying on now. The dead kings of Cornwall were all buried here—Constantine, and the rest."

"And who is the King of Cornwall now, Barbara?"

"George, I suppose," she replied in matter-of-fact tones. And I became annoyed.

"I have the deepest respect for George and Mary—but they've got all the rest of England and India, and so on. Cornwall is different, it ought to have a monarch of its own. *I* will be King of Cornwall. And this burial-ground shall be my throne. And I'll start with a massacre, just to show 'em!"

"There's no one here to show, and there's no one here to massacre either." Barbara raised herself on elbow, and looked me steadily in the face.

"Am I then alone on the Dead Kings' Burial-ground?"

She thought it over. Then—"I think you're a pig," in inconsequent discovery.

"*Lèse Majesté.* That settles it."

Just in time to save herself from being precipitated into the abyss down that sinister slope disguised innocently by the blowing sea-thrift, Barbara called out—"If you're King of Cornwall, I'm Queen!"—and I released her.

"Why couldn't you say so before? It might have been too late to save yourself. That would have been quite a good joke, though . . . the first joke perpetrated by his Merry Majesty, King Kevin of Cornwall. . . . I'm going to revive some of these rich mediaeval forms of humour."

"We'll have a jester, then, to be funny."

"We'll have an executioner to be funny," grimly.

" I don't like executioners much. Because of Lady Jane Grey. He took two blows with the axe before he cut it off."

"If our executioner ever takes more than one blow to cut it off, he shall be executed by the jester."

"And we'll all look on, and laugh heartily," cried Barbara, unexpectedly displaying some of the rich and jocund spirit of the more full-blooded period I was reviving.

"Are you keen on pomp and ceremony and ritual and regalia?—barbaric splendour and profligate customs?"

"Yes, I'd enjoy it sometimes; but it would make me feel stuffy, like Sundays, if I had too much of it!"

"We could always run away and throw off our shoes and stockings and go prawning, when we were fed up——"

"Or smuggling. This coast is packed with secret paths and caves and doorways in the rock—Oh, could we—I mean, would it be compatible with our royal dignity?" her lips were parted in breathless excitement, her eyes freckled with roguery.

"To patronize smugglers? Our subjects needn't know, need they?—and we'll be admitted to all the smugglers' councils and pow-wows and villainous enterprises. Oh, and wreckers ought to be encouraged. Wrecking was a glorious pastime for winter evenings. You light a match on a headland and trust to luck that the foundering ship holds treasure to be washed ashore with the cold tide at dawn. It's great

fun—much better than tiddliwinks. We'll exact kegs of old brandy and gold dust and rolls of lace as tribute from every sunken ship, and the wreckers can put on their advertisement 'Under Royal Patronage —Wreckers to their Majesties the King and Queen of Cornwall.' " . . .

"Like bootmakers," murmured Barbara. "Supposing the cargo turned out to be only penwipers or—or lexicons?"

I reminded her that bloodthirsty pirates have bloodthirsty cargoes—"Such as blood-oranges and—oh, what other bloodish thing is there that one can mention in good society?"

"Blood relations?" suggested Barbara doubtfully. "I think that if a cargo of blood relations were washed ashore, I should want to throw them to the Potted Gargoyle."

"I didn't know we had one, but it's quite a good thought."

"He lives in that cave and he ramps," pointing downwards—"But he's only Partly-a-Gargoyle; we are not *quite* sure what the other part is," Barbara reluctantly confessed.

I shrugged my shoulders; "Why worry?"

"Oh, I don't. And then I have other royal visitors —jolly people like Prester John and the Khan of Samarkand. I'll invest them with the Grand Order of Partly-a-Gargoyle."

"With the crest and motto: 'Why worry?' It's rather cheek of you to talk about investing *your*

visitors, though, in that independent sort of fashion. *I'm* going to give dinner-parties that will shock you——"

"Shock away!"

I looked at her apprehensively.

"How old are you? Sixteen?"

"Nearly eighteen. You can't shock me."

Thus challenged, I boldly announced my intention of entertaining six selected harlot empresses of ancient Rome.

"Pooh!" Barbara exclaimed, as though she had sported with harlot empresses all her life.

"Messalina, Faustina, Theodora, Poppæa, Cleopatra—she was Egypt, but it doesn't matter—Jezebel and Jael." I re-filled my pipe with a satisfied air.

"That's seven, and you've mixed the Bible in."

"Aholibah and Lucrezia Borgia," firmly, to show that I was not going to be bullied by any schoolgirl. "Lucrezia might be able to give me a wrinkle or two."

"She would," vindictively, "a great many—the cat! And that makes nine harlot empresses."

"And I'll invite nine evangelical curates to take them in to dinner. The harlots shall drink tumblers of new milk from our own dairy, and the curates some richly-stained and evil-looking liqueurs in green and gold and translucent crimson. During the courses my favourite jongleur shall improvise songs concerning my valiant prowess and doughty deeds."

"Ought we to bore our guests?" queried Barbara

innocently. But a swift revenge overwhelmed her:

"*My* guests. You shall come into dessert, if you're good, Babs, and recite to us, in your white spotted muslin and wide blue sash."

Her indignation rose and crashed upon me like a wave.

"I haven't got a white spotted muslin—who—who told you I had——?"

"And a wreath of sea-thrift in your hair." Teasingly I dropped a whole handful of the blossom over her face and her slender white arms—Barbara never seemed to tan, for all her boyish disregard of coverings. It was good to be there and talk nonsense to this pretty schoolgirl with the frank, questioning eyes. . . . And, somehow, looking at Barbara's unconscious grace softly defined by her short, grey-green skirt and faded jersey and cap of the same hue, looking at Barbara, and knowing how absolutely certain she was, in her rigid baby code, of right and wrong, straight and crooked; aware that she was simply and sublimely unaware of—well, practically everything; looking at Barbara, I felt as though my hatred of Larry and all the evil it had entailed was pouring away like black rapids, leaving me a little dazed, forgetful and secure, aloft on this sunwashed pinnacle, among the sea-thrift with Barbara. . . .

Glad of her, I put out a hand and laid it over hers —the Lord knows I meant no harm—no sinister designs on a trustful maid . . . but Barbara was plainly disconcerted. She flushed crimson—flung

me a tentative, questioning glance—turned her head away again; I saw her lips quiver; her hand had jerked once under mine, then was obviously redirected to remain quiescent. I followed her racing emotions easily enough. . . .

"Why not ask *me?*" I suggested.

"You?—but I wasn't—Ask what?"

"What you're just now longing to ask your mother or your best friend—the proper behaviour when a young man . . . does this? Ask me, dear, since I'm here."

Barbara was wildly bewildered. She was prepared that I should go to any length of wickedness, but not that I should make kind offer to assist her in the perplexities of which I was the cause.

"Your first instinct," I teased her, "was to snatch your hand away and run, but it struck you that I might consider such conduct very juvenile, and that you ought rather to impress me, by your perfect haughtiness and *savoir faire,* that you are capable of dealing with such trifling incidentals . . . so unwillingly you left it there, Barbara, and tilted up your nose at the sky . . . but that was such a very puzzled, piteous look that you shot at me, when you thought I was busy with my pipe. You were wondering what it would lead to, and whether you were a prig to mind—and—Micky and Ned wouldn't approve, would they? They'd call you soppy. Only life, *your* life, is slipping beyond the judgment of even Micky, nowadays. And then—and then, Bar-

bara, you started to feel a little bit happier, though the monster's hand was still holding yours—because your mouth curved at the corners, and your frown got sort of mixed up with a smile—and—and I believe you began to like it, Barbara . . ."

I released the small clenched fist.

"This is what they call flirting, Barbara."

"I hate girls who flirt," came muffled from chastity cooling her cheeks among the springy cushions of the thrift. "I mean, I hate men who flirt."

"So do I," heartily. "Who began it, though?"

"Oh—*you!*" springing upright in raging contradiction.

"Quite right. Me. I'm awfully penitent. You can push me into that pool of slimy black seaweed on the way home, if you like. But there was no harm really, you know!"

Doubtful, now, her deep scrutiny—and still bewildered. Then, reassured, it broke into gay laughter:

"It was so absurd of you to suggest that I should ask you what to do!"

"There's no fixed rule, Babs. You must judge your man, that's all."

"Kevin, you're queer!"

"Not sure if you like me, eh?"

"Oh, but I do!" swiftly. Then she bit her lip. "I'm sure we shall be jolly good friends when we know each other better."

"My reply in the style of the Young Ladies' Curriculum is—garn! Your hand again, Barbara."

She complied—her predicament left her no choice, alone with a madman on the Dead Kings' Burial-ground.

"Now—shall I shake it in comradeship or kiss it in homage?"

"Kiss it, please," said Barbara, after due deliberation.

I was glad to bend quickly, and hide the irrepressible smile, which was sheer enjoyment of an honest, clean-minded hoyden in the process of becoming a dishonest and adorable woman.

"Look at the sun," Barbara exclaimed suddenly —"it's late. Race you home as far as Wine Cove!"

I only just beat her. She ran as girls with brothers are trained to run, fleetly and sparing of breath and without bagging or sagging in all directions. But the western blaze was in our eyes, and the gold-dyed pools and puddles swam wavering in our path—we were soaked in saltwater, scratched and hot and our knees sand-plastered, before we reached the white road that writhed inland and uphill amongst the hummocks sown with strong rushes that flogged the bare legs; till, robed and crowned in that sublime messiness of the seashore, which is never to be confounded with the earthier term of "grubby," the newly elected monarchs of the Cornish kingdom plunged shouting into the kitchen of The Shoe.

[4]

After supper, Micky challenged me to a game of Polish bezique.

"It's not a game we play at the Club," I rejoined loftily—for I was a bit nervous of Micky, and had to summon up a mythical club or two as props to my self-esteem. "What about a round or two of Auction?"

"Are you a good player?" Micky, in his turn, showed signs of nervousness.

"The Nicaraguan plenipotentiary was kind enough to say that if he could have had a few lessons from me before his famous encounter with the bridge champion of Montenegro, the borough of East Kensington would not have been lost to the Conversative party."

Micky wisely decided to stick to Polish bezique. It was one of those horribly easy games that somehow the enlightened mind refuses to grasp. In fact, Micky won. His behaviour, at the final victory, had not that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. He flung himself, burbling and chortling, on the ground, wholly small boy, his cheeks pink with delight, his hair in a triumphant crest, his heels ecstatically beaten together. I restrained myself with difficulty from raising him on to my knee with an affectionate kiss.

"Ho! ho! ho! I've whacked the champion player of his Club! What price the great Lord Kevin

Somers and his bridge now? Hurrah! Ned, I've won! Babs, mummy—I've won by 370 points—What would they say to that at the club?"

"Well, naturally at the Club we never know who has won or lost; it's not considered decent form to let one's manner betray emotion one way or another. But thanks for a very good game, Micky. . . ."

Micky had become silent and thoughtful, and his legs ceased to waggle. The following evening he again approached me, with demeanour planed down to the level of careful indifference.

"I'll be delighted to give you your revenge—if you care about it, of course."

I did care about it immensely. Micky's altered manners were a dream. My exclusive and non-existent Club would have elected him to membership without a murmur. When the final reckoning proved him again the winner, he said nonchalantly, without a trace of his former elation—"I had all the luck, I'm afraid. You held rotten cards—no one could do anything with them. Thanks for a very good game."

"On the contrary, thank *you!*" not to be outdone in excellence of breeding. And my opponent, with a laconic nod to me, answered his mother's fourteenth frenzied call sty-wards and bed-wards.

"I worship and adore your youngest son," I informed Kate, when she returned to the kitchen and claimed me for a last stroll.

She twinkled comprehensively—"I'm afraid I do too. I'm a wicked mother to show favouritism. He

told me just now—'I *did* want him to win this game, mums, as I came off best last night, but all the picture cards happened to fall my way; and, of course, I couldn't insult him by giving him the game!' What have you done to him, Kevin? Is he always going to be like this? I don't think I can live up to it, and I'm sure Henry can't."

"When two men of the world get together, their intercourse is bound to conform to a certain unspoken code; but Micky doesn't realize how near he came to being embraced today——"

"Barbara does," brusquely from my hostess.

I smoked on in obstinate silence, fully aware of Kate's cheery resolution to work havoc amongst my reserves and Barbara's confidences.

"Listen to that cricket. . . ."

"You wouldn't listen to any crickets, my dear young man, if you had to listen to a daughter clamouring for a mother's wise and prudent supervision—'he held my hand for a minute and a half, mother.' 'My dear, he can hold your foot for an hour and a half if he likes'—That produced fireworks!—I'll never get this book of mine finished, Kevin, never; it's hopeless! To hear her educate me in circumspection and fierce young modesty! . . . the kind that keeps a girl at home with her mother all her life instead of getting married. 'I wouldn't bother Kevin with all that,' I advised her—'It'll put him off.' "

I groaned into the night—"For the Lord's sake, K. B. Seton—listen to that cricket."

It was like thrusting a small twig under Niagara, to divert the waterfall.

"All this rumpus was while we were making the beds, out on the lawn this evening; it wasn't my turn to make 'em, and I may as well inform you that guests are expected to do their share, even if they persist in sleeping in a frowsy attic."

"Yes. I'll do them tomorrow," meekly. But I really could not consent to lay myself down in a row with Henry, Ned, and Barbara.

" 'You'll be sorry if I go headlong to the devil!' " —and I grasped that my companion had again resumed quotation from the recent scene with her daughter—" 'Not you, my dear, you're not the kind that does!' and *that* didn't please her, either. Oh, but I'm right enough, Kevin, to be quite tranquil about Barbara. Her maternal instinct will keep her out of mischief. Now if she'd inherited Henry's decadent curiosities——"

I professed a mighty interest in Henry's decadent curiosities. It was my private opinion that he had none; but anything was better than treating the cloisters of Barbara's soul as though they were the Grand Parade at Brighton. Kate burst forth again a few moments later—and I informed her that no *bonâ fide* navvy would act as she had manipulated him in her last book but one. Her indignant justification of the navvy brought us safely across the last field home.

A slender and beautifully-shaped white sleeping-

suit, carrying a candle, was darting in pursuit of a dumpy blanket-bag, that waddled comically through the murky air and into a hedge; a clear whoop—and the sleeping-suit dipped and disappeared after him; and only a pair of bats wheeled dismally in their stead. . . . I rubbed my eyes:

"Midsummer Eve! . . . are those flapping things all that's left to us of Barbara and Ned?"

And Kate Seton chuckled heartlessly:

"As long as Micky isn't translated——"

[5]

I cannot account for this odd unrolling of time and space illimitably, and not in hard, little alternate blocks of day and night, between London and Porthgollan; between the group of Larry and Felicity and Prue and the first Larry, and the wholesome pugnacity of the Setons in their Shoe. Until after the final tragedy of Felicity receiving me in the sprigged muslin and corals, I had been webbed into a fantastic dream played out among real and matter-of-fact surroundings. Now, in metamorphosis, I was among people wholly real and matter-of-fact, but with their bare, brown feet sturdily planted in a dream country, a nursery-rhyme village . . . light glass-green pools shadowed with fig-purple . . . bad-tempered grey seas hurled into runnels and veins of white against high, bulging rocks.

The Larry conspiracy dwindled to a mere speck of

horror. And every little daily happening, trivial or absurd: Lulu, drunk with snails, sowing her wild oats in the corn—Micky and his game of Polish bezique—Barbara and Ned bolstering each other into a ditch by candlelight—the absurd struttings of a swan who lived without a lake or any visible means of support, in the village—K. B. Seton in her crimson plush tea-gown raking in ducks from the blind pedlar, bargaining for butter in the butcher's rose-wreathed porch, smuggling in fish that ought to have been dispatched to London before it ultimately returned to Porthgollan: K. B. Seton dragging away a mournful Henry from perusal of "Getting Married," in order to air the pillows and the blanket-bags and the striped rugs —"I don't like that man George Shaw for *you*, Henry —try a volume of Edna Lyall when you've finished your job!" All these trivial daily happenings piled themselves high and higher, barricading the present from a past in which all happenings had been huge and sinister and out of scale.

The Setons were the sort of family who, from a divine lack of imagination, would survive all circumstances, and never succumb to them. In sheer arrogance of their own physical hardness, the younger members scuffled joyously all day long; I was presently infected by the pummelling fashion, and tossed and rolled and prodded with the rest. Barbara, who in her moods of wakening femininity would not suffer me to lay one light finger on her arm, joined as unconsciously as any boy in the hilarious medley

of limbs and laughter, when we bathed, and explored, and kicked each other round the kitchen.

But the Setons had a habit of interlacing their exuberance with periods of silent, thoughtful scrutiny, to be followed by a disconcerting summing-up of impressions in which the possible sensitiveness of the guest, helpless in their midst, was disregarded with a serene brutality that I have never since encountered. This habit was a legacy from Kate to her three children, matching their deep-set grey-blue gaze. Only Henry relieved the uneasiness of the Setons observant, by his amiable brown eyes that bulged slightly and missed everything essential. I learnt to protect myself against Kate and Ned and Barbara by a subtle counter-attack which had all the misleading appearances of boyish candour; but our golden-haired and cherubic Micky was a veritable demon, and the utmost I achieved against him was a draw.

But never could it be said of the Setons that they were elusive, or dim, or fantastic, or in any way delicately outlined. The Setons were a fact—five facts —labelled Writing Woman, Decadent, Maternal Instinct, Pagan, and Psychic. They lived in a Shoe, except for Psychic, who lived in a sty; and they owned a shiny black pig called Lulu, who crunched snails; and two of us were King and Queen of Cornwall, except on Sundays when we went to the chemist's to hear the muffin-bell ring for sprats; and we bathed so often that we lost count: and ate thrice a day and thrice between thrice—which neither Micky nor I

could work out in a satisfactory multiplication sum; and the weather scuttled to a change every hour, so that optimists could affirm that the black-swept skies never lasted long anyhow, and the pessimists grumble at the capricious duration of the hour blue-dabbled; and after a ship had been wrecked, we dived for coal, and swam against tides for bobbing driftwood, and lugged our spoil into the house for winter firing—triumphant with the sense of having wrested gain from rocks and water and earth themselves, instead of paying in coin, which is a tame and foolish means of attainment. Sometimes we found more than driftwood—queer, clean objects, white and bleaching, in a fairy pool—and they were bones ("said the old bold mate of Henry Morgan!"). And there was once upon a time an old squire of the neighbourhood—really a Farmer Old who married a Miss Squire . . . thus things are tweaked out of shape in Porthgollan!—and he found Barbara and myself sprawling deep in sorrel and clover, and hobbled around us poking us absurdly with his stick and muttering. "I did think as ee were sheep, as ee were sheep, as ee were sheep. . . . Hev ee seen a couple o' turkeys pass along?"

Nursery-rhymes and Hans Andersen and a smugglers' shore. . . . We were entirely happy, the Setons and I.

"I've thought of something jolly to do!" exclaimed Ned, at breakfast.

Barbara and Micky and I exchanged mournful

looks—then clasped hands and bade each other good-bye.

"Yes, my son, tell us!" Kate encouraged Ned in suicide and murder, on the grounds that she liked her boys to be healthy-minded.

"I believe we could toboggan down the steeper sand-hills; anyway, I'll rig up a board and we'll have a try."

"Here's Eye-solda!" Micky spied the gallant post-girl with the leather satchel cycling up the field-path towards the house. She entered with her usual air of bringing the good news from Ghent to Aix; flung down the letters plus a few chaffing remarks to Henry, whose favourite she was, and pedalled furiously off.

I was glad when, as today, there were no letters for me—sharp little cries from the distance, piercing the atmosphere of thick, healing peace in which I was miraculously encased.

"D'you ever get any briefs, Kevin?" asked Micky.

"Thousands. The office boy makes boats out of 'em when they're the right sort of paper." And indeed, I *had* received two briefs in the past year. . . .

Kate Seton looked up from her correspondence to say: "Babs, Larry Munro *is* coming!"

[6]

And Barbara dropped a hot splitter, and cried joyfully: "Oh, Mums—when?"

"Where's he to sleep?" carolled Micky.

"On Saturday, he writes—what's today? Tuesday? I'm sure I don't know, darling—I never know where anybody is to sleep till I see how long and how wide and how particular they are. Kevin, this is a young man who has lost his head over my books, and written me charming letters to say so. I'd rather my husband had explained this to you, beaming with pride, while I modestly tried to stop him, but he's as usual knee-deep in 'Androcles and the Lion.'—So I wrote back suggesting to him that he should come down to Porthgollan for a holiday to make my acquaintance—and be surprised how young I was, and how pretty. . . . After a long pause he has suddenly decided that he will. Babs, go on with your breakfast, and try to look as if young men happened to you every day; you may not be his style at all—evidently he prefers elderly women!"

Henry shut Androcles with a bang. "I don't wish to be consulted. I hold that the happiest person in a household is the cypher. My dear Kate, my dear Barbara, I should be sorry if you let my opinion influence you in the slightest. But I do *not* think these—these stray strangers ought to be encouraged to come and make a home amongst us."

"Oh, daddy, it isn't as bad as that!"

"I've never heard such narrow-minded rubbish in all my life, Henry. What would George Shaw say if he could hear you?"

"May we only get to know people we know already?" Micky's bit of a nose was tilted to an

angle of such impertinent innocence, as ought to have brought a fist crashing down upon it.

Henry Seton, almost extinguished, murmured: "He might be a coster."

"I can reassure you about that, sir," I laughed—"I know Larry Munro—yes, isn't it queer?—Oh, quite intimately; we lived next door and went to the same school!" and I laughed again—at this beautifully inadequate rendering of my relations with Larry. "As a matter of fact, it was I who lent him two of your books!"

"Then did you know all the time he was coming here?"

"No."

"What's he like?" The chorus went up.

I began to praise Larry, hectically. The effusion jarred in my own ears . . . it sounded so unnaturally generous, as though I were trying to gain favour by unconsciously revealing myself the blatant sort of good fellow who has always a fund of enthusiasm in stock when a pal is mentioned. But had I not praised Larry, what would I have said of him? And some perverse solo in my brain, thrumming against the whole discordant orchestra of hate, wanted these Setons to appreciate the fact that *my* friend Larry Munro claimed attention as something vivid and finely modelled, and rather rare. . . .

If I could have been silent—but there was no chance of it under pressure of the eager curiosity of Barbara, and Ned, and Micky.

"Is he a sport?"

"He sounds fascinating from your description." This was Barbara.

"Is he good-looking?"

"Does he swank?"

"Will he mind ragging?"

"Can he dance?"

"Who cares—can he swim?"

"Does he hate girls?"

"Oh, shut up, Babs—you do ask the most idiotic questions! I want to know——"

"*I* want to know," from Kate Seton—"and Mr. Munro being my special visitor, I'd like you children to be quiet for half a moment—whether he's a good trencher-man, in which case we'll kill Lulu——"

"Mums!!!"

"And whether he's moderately intelligent?—of course he is, as he likes my books—and whether there is a twinkle in his eye?—I can't stand solemn people—and what's his private sorrow, and his inherited vice, and his confidential history, and his hidden depravity, and do you consider, Kevin, between ourselves, that he has the paternal instinct?"

I smiled at the rapacious lady, and answered simply, "Yes, he has an excellent appetite. Let us sacrifice Lulu."

I lay on the bank of a field adjoining the garden of The Shoe. I lay in a tangle of sweet-smelling grasses

and weeds, with warm, wet honey-suckle weighing down a hedge above me in great splashes of thick cream, and gold-dusty fawn, and flesh colour; I lay there—and hated Larry. . . .

These attacks of mine frightened me by their intensity; with each recurrence they waxed more savage and corrosive—further beyond my control.

You must not allow yourself to feel like this—you *must* not . . . for your own sake. Larry is coming down here? Well, what of it? Need it matter to you? Yes, but—but——

Why can't he leave me alone?

Honey-suckle and clover field and belt of dark blue sea swirled into stammering black. . . . Leave me *alone*, Larry—I came here to get rid of you—to get away from you—not to hear you or see you. This is *my* fortress—*my* friends—they like me . . . they'll like you better—I shall be forced to watch it happen. . . . Or I can go. . . . Damn you. . . . Why should I be driven out—pressed out—by you? It's all done on purpose. You beast! You beast! and I was beginning to forget. . . .

[7]

Micky dropped over the nearest gate, looked around him, and espying me, sauntered along to my side.

"I've been on the hunt for you."

I uttered no word of welcome, and wished I had

betaken my surliness to a remoter spot. The boy curled himself up against the bank, snuggled his head down on his arms. His eyes glinted at me sideways . . . they were extraordinarily blue and bad this morning. He matched my sombre silence with a pregnant one of his own. At last—

"You don't want Larry Munro to come here."

It was no query, but an assertion delivered with quiet infallibility.

"Why shouldn't I? He's an awfully decent chap. We've been pals for years."

"You said so at breakfast. The others think you're glad he's coming. But I wasn't sure. I went out to think it over. I'm sure now. I've got you sized up and squeezed up, and put away in a box and ticketed, every bit of you."

"P-some p-sychologist," I teased him—feeling fairly helpless, notwithstanding. "You're a young ass, Micky—I really *am* keen on Larry."

"Oh yes, you *like* him all right. But you don't want him here. You like him in a funny sort of way. It will be interesting to watch you together."

Micky's metaphorical legs were waggling proudly in the air. He was not a fourteen-year-old boy at the moment, but a fiendish little gnome, with the long grey beard of experience, and the twinkle of a soulless other world in all he said. To shatter the illusion, I forced myself to remember a certain photograph of a school group in which Micky, Captain of his Eleven, lolled back at his lordly ease in a deck chair, while

his ten companions, of whom he was the smallest and chubbiest, sat meekly about on the grass. This more commonplace presentment of Micky gave me confidence.

"I say, I wonder if you'd mind fetching my pipe? It's amongst the pottery on the dresser, I think."

"Right-o," courteously Micky rose and set out for the house.

"And, Micky," I called out—he turned, "when you've fetched it——"

"Yes?"

"Don't fag to bring it back here."

He understood, but he did not grin or fling me a rude *tu quoque*; the dignified set of his back as he disappeared over the gate, revealed plainly his state of mind. I was a brute to have hurt Micky—but I was never a brute till the old kick at the heels, and joggle at the elbows made itself felt—it was Larry's fault—Larry—Larry Munro always. . . . Oh, curse him!

Only this time I had done it myself, enflaming the bitterness . . . fool, idiot, dolt, why did you ever lend him those books? Why, after your years of vigilance, quick to destroy the most far-fetched possibility of admitting Larry into the ultimate refuge where you hoped to escape from him in any crisis of sick-weariness. . . .

And the crisis had come, and the refuge, and immunity. And this was Tuesday, and he was coming on Saturday . . . because I had lent him a

couple of books. "You did it yourself! Yah! yah! yah! did it yourself!" . . . If only I could have strangled my screeching, scoffing ego!

"Ahoy, Babs—I want you—quick!" it was Ned calling from his tool-shed in the garden.

"Wait a sec.!" clear and distant.

"Can't!"

"Right!" the pad of her feet made no sound on the grass, but it was barely half a minute later that I heard him say, "Put your hand here—no, *here*. Yes, of course it's the toboggan—did you think it was a shoe-horn?"

Barbara's reply was quenched in the monotonous journey of the saw backwards and forwards.

"I say—was that your thumb?"

"No . . . it's all right."

"Sorry. Can you hold on?"

"Yes," gallantly. And the drowsy sawing recommenced.

". . . I want a girl who'd be idiotic and intolerant *with* me. . . . Oh, that girl! how she'd pick up sticks in a wood, and help a fellow get a fire burning under a gipsy tripod. . . ."

It was not Ned speaking now, but Larry . . . and my numb senses had started awake to recognition at last. . . . Barbara—Barbara was two dream-girls materialized into one. Larry's mate, who would help him light his gipsy fire—had she not

just borne uncomplainingly her brother's clumsy saw across her thumb? . . . Larry's girl, young as tree-buds in February; and she was also the girl predestined to our rivalry, whom my instinct had foretold years and years ago, when on the floor of Felicity's drawing-room, two small boys had fought over an entirely unimportant Hon. Nina.

Then—did I love Barbara, whom Larry was to love? . . . What else had been the powerful enchantment of this holiday? I had come in pain beyond the healing of mere change or place or event; beyond Setons and nursery rhymes and sea-dip, for all my pretence that these had wrought the warlock forgetfulness of yet a third Larry. . . .

Barbara . . . child-mouth which I had not dared to kiss, and soul the most clear and honest of any in the world. . . . Barbara, who could romp like a boy and flush petal crimson like a shy girl; whose impulse ran, without a single loop, towards truth, as a straight white road with one lonely dwelling-house at the end of it. . . . No doubt but that I loved Barbara—and that Larry would love Barbara—and that Barbara——

No doubt of it. The gibing conspiracy was working itself out nicely.

But how furiously she would repudiate Larry if she knew of his seven years' infatuation and thraldom to Felicity, my mother! Barbara was of that type most ruthless, most terrible in condemnation, when

faced by a story that could not quite be faced. Barbara was the normal schoolgirl who judged darkness fearlessly, because she lived in the clear light. We who have learned tolerance are merely blinking sideways into the shadows where our own kinks and waywardness, adjustments, transgressions, lie submerged.

Especially in matters of sex, of which she was wholly and gloriously ignorant, would Barbara be most severe.

If she were told about Larry. . . .

How should she be told? Larry himself would not be likely to make confession—abstaining not from deliberate deceit, but a certain wanton loss of memory where it pleased him to forget. And nobody else could tell her.

Oh . . . *I* could tell her, of course.

For the second time that morning, I laughed—but with a sardonic grimace towards the suave Conspirator who had not been quite humane enough to make me a cad.

The dinner-bell, chiming faintly over the honeysuckle, found me still wrenching up green things from the reluctant mould . . . and hating Larry. I hauled myself erect, and looked down at the mutilated havoc of bald patches and splintered stems, torn up star-blossoms fading in the sun, grasses crushed flat and limp . . . it seemed as though I ought to apologize —a man has no right to vent his temper on the kindly earth.

[8]

Barbara was at her gayest during dinner, too guileless to conceal her exhilaration at the prospect of yet another flirtation (well, not *really* flirting!). So it *was* true what she had vaguely heard and dreamily anticipated, that young men, all alive and kicking, were legitimate plunder of a girl grown-up. One—yes, certainly!—but two in a summer were unexpected bounty.

Life was tremendously jolly and exciting. . . . So much I read in Barbara's radiant demeanour. She did not refer to her thumb bound up in a strip of linen—a sister must be damaged in the service of brothers, and make no plaint.

The talk of Ned and Micky was all of the toboggan, to be tested that afternoon. Micky's manner to me was a shade cold. I was sorrowful, but not surprised. I wished I had not offended Micky. Henry stayed outside for the meal, refusing to leave the side of a sick guinea-pig who was also a prospective mother; his dinner was brought to him.

As for me, I wondered whereabouts Larry would sit at the table, and if in a position where I should see his face every time I looked up from my plate.

"I say, Kev, where have you been all the morning? Did you bathe?"

"No. I'll bathe when the tide's up in the bay this evening."

"Aren't you going to toboggan with us? We

thought of whizzing you down first to prepare the slide, as you're the heaviest!"

"I don't like to be so pampered, Ned. Make me useful; I prefer it."

Micky chuckled . . . and, I believe, forgave me.

We tried all the lesser slopes and hillocks among the dunes; and then I pointed out a sandy cliff at a steep angle from the bay:

"That looks a good one!" restless at the unperilous thing our pastime had hitherto proved.

"M' no," said Ned, to my astonishment. Micky and the toboggan were sprawling a few yards apart on the shore below, he in the attitude of a tortoise turned over on his back and unable to recover any other equilibrium.

"Why not?" Babs ran along between the whipping grasses, to the crest of my suggested slide, and peered over. "Looks a bit steep," carelessly, as I thudded up to her.

Her tone indicated that she was ready to applaud me for attempting a feat on which even Ned had put a veto.

"Board, Micky!" I halloed.

"No. Are you?" in a faint treble from the yellow-haired tortoise.

"We—want—the—toboggan—up—here!" Barbara called, with a distinctness that purported trouble for her young brother.

"Speak to it kindly, then. Or whistle to it," piped Micky.

I raised my eyebrows towards Ned, who promptly scrambled down by the quickest route, made Micky swallow a handful of dry and unpleasant seaweed encrusted with mussels—"for his cheek!" and returned, dragging the toboggan behind him.

"Bet you can't do this!" I said brutally—we were none of us at our best that afternoon. Astride of the roughly-carved plank, I launched it over the edge, with its nose obliquely pointed. . . .

"Oh, Kev, had you better?"

"He's a fool!" gruffly from Ned.

The toboggan, gaining speed, whizzed rapidly down a natural glide of smooth shining silver. Tingling to exhilaration after the innumerable bumps and stoppages we had endured in our former experiences, I caught sight of Micky erect suddenly, dancing and gesticulating like a frenzied Dervish almost directly under my descending swoop.

I could not be certain of a slow finish—so I shouted him a warning to remove himself. . . . Then, with a movement of the foot, slewed round on my course, struck against a protruding hummock of grass—the toboggan darted out into space . . . sunstab full in my eyes across the bay . . . was that Micky who yelled as the wildly spiralling beach sprang up and hit my head a dull heavy bang? . . . *Don't*, Larry, it isn't fair! . . . but Larry only answered: "The train is in, so the chemist is out!" and went on padding at my heels down the passages of Portland prison, banging me on the head and body

with a bladder. . . . I glanced over my shoulder in running, and saw that he was in Harlequin costume —he smiled his nice crooked smile . . . yes, but you can run faster than I, because you're lighter— and because I'm carrying Lulu—how did the rhyme go? "Stole—a pig—" that's it—"Stole a pig and away he run;" had I stolen Lulu? . . . "away he run" . . . there was something wrong about that line—they might have put it right first. . . . But he never caught up with me, only irritated me with the persevering kick on the heels, jolt at my doubled elbows.

. . . Surely we must come to the end of it soon— this maze of passages between high black walls—they spread quickly—before I could spring out of them, spread till they covered the space of the whole world . . . dead world . . . Larry and I shut up in it alone—and yet not enough room for us. . . . If I could meet Wentworth I'd ask him to supper with Messalina. . . . Oh, God, let me meet some one! round the next bend, then, or the next . . . feet usually make a noise if one stamps them—not on sand . . . glittering silver sand. . . . Larry, leave me alone! leave me—*alone*. . . .

Good, here's some one at last—far away—nearer —rushing towards me. . . .

—Only Larry again. Then there's more than one Larry. I know that—who told me? Miss Beech— Miss Hilda Beech. . . .

"Tom, Tom, the piper's son,
Stole a pig and away he run."

There *is* something wrong with it—George Shaw wrote it—let's ask George Shaw. . . . Can he play Polish bezique, though? Hurrah, Ned, I've beaten the great George Shaw—I need hardly point out, my lord, that the defendant, by admitting this, renders himself entirely ineligible. . . .

But I'm tired of high black walls and a silver muffler under my feet and grim unechoing silences. . . . Hush, that's because Larry Munro is dying behind one of the walls. Which? The next? . . . Can't I lie down and die too? I could, if Larrikin weren't looking over the wall at me . . . such a little boy—how did he get up there? Felicity called him Humpty dumpty. . . . Barbara knows all about Felicity—then the fat's in the fire. The sheep's in the meadow, the fat's in the fire—

My dear Larry, you must blame Micky for that. Yes, but I'm *so* tired, am I *never* to sleep indoors again, Mummy? Felicity doesn't like me to call her Mummy. . . . Who said I can't tell Babs?—Babs!——

"Yes, Kevin?"

That was a voice not Larry's at last. I stood still, cautiously—had he gone? . . .

"Kevin."

. . . Very, very tired after all that running, but

so glad to be back again in my attic at the Shoe, with Barbara's fingers lightly touching my forehead. . . . I did not even want to open my eyes, or to know why I was in bed, nor what day of the week it might be.

But Larry was coming on Saturday.

—Oh, Larry spoils everything, always. I had been dreaming about Larry—gruesome dreams, he had banged me with a bladder——

"Oh, Mums, he's been talking such a lot of nonsense."

"Poor fellow. He's quiet enough now."

"Yes, but he isn't conscious; I spoke to him, and he never moved."

"Kevin!" in Kate Seton's pleasant authoritative tones.

But it was too much work to respond. I just meditated listlessly on the nonsense I might have talked, with Babs listening. Suppose—Suppose I had given myself away in my hatred of Larry. . . .

"At any rate, Dr. Mackworth is bound to be here by nine—he promised me——"

Or suppose—I almost started upright with the thought, but an incomprehensible instinct kept me still simulating unconsciousness—suppose in delirium I had revealed the secret of Larry and Felicity—secret I so ached for Barbara to know—secret which would cause her to hate him . . . as I did——

You can't tell her. No, of course I can't . . . but if it came to the surface like froth while I was not

responsible, nobody can blame me—I couldn't blame myself—for that? Barbara said: "He's been talking a lot of nonsense." . . .

"—No, Mums—only a jumble of words and names and bits, and once he recited 'Tom, Tom, the piper's son' "—I heard Barbara's low, clear laugh—"Oh, I oughtn't to laugh, but it *was* rather funny, and—and—he's not really bad, is he, Mumsie?"

"No, my dear—only a slight concussion, I should imagine. But we'll hear when the doctor comes. Meanwhile I'll fetch——"

Disappointment flowed over my mind and swamped it in a black tide. I had revealed no secret. Babs would certainly have told her mother, here and now. Even with soul and body wrenched apart, it seemed I could not do myself any good . . . and those walls were beginning to rise again out of the sand.

"Barbara."

"Yes, Kevin?" Her eagerness rent the gauze wrappings which entwined my understanding.

"Don't let Larry bang me over the head with a bladder": I could hear my voice in quite lucid appeal, but had no more control over its utteraces than over the tick of clockwork wound up to go.

"No, of course not."

The attic with its porthole bracelet of dark blue sea—my hot little camp bed—Barbara—slid themselves fantastically into the recurring nightmare of walls and sand.

"I can run faster than you, but not as fast as

Larry," I went on. And wondered with some curiosity what the voice—my voice—was going to say after that. It was a funny sensation—not at all bad.

One thing that I must *not* say—not now that I was conscious—I had missed my chance—what was it?—Larry's mistress is my mother—Larry's mother is my mistress——

That was me laughing. Well, no wonder! Such a comical idea—I and Prue. . . . So I went on chuckling quite happily. Bang—bang—the bladder again, on the back of my head. Larry, as usual, interfering when I was happy. . . . Not fear now, but fury—choking red fury obsessed me. . . . And I could, I *could* have my revenge. . . . I had just to say, "Larry's mistress is my mother."

No, no, Felicity, no, darling. . . . I had forgotten that it would hurt you too. . . .

Only—that last time . . . I knew quite well that I must never speak it aloud—but it seemed to me that I heard the words—and in my own voice—that last time. . . .

I began to run again, stumbling in the sand. . . .

[9]

It was, as Kate Seton had prophesied, only a very slight concussion. Within three days I was walking, shakily enough, about the garden, and even a little way across the clover field and up the honey-suckle lane, or down the white road to the sea. The Setons were cheery and off-hand as usual in their surface

treatment of me, but it was obvious, nevertheless, that they considered I had saved Micky's life at the risk of my own, by diverting the plunge of the toboggan . . . and that he was very uncomfortable about it. I was compelled to cheer him by privately pointing out that I had no right to have attempted that particular descent; and that any fatal results to him of my foolhardiness would have turned my hair white in a single night——

"You see," Micky explained gratefully, "I was trying to warn you, when I jumped about and shouted, that you would have to leap the last twelve yards, because the slope bit inwards suddenly, where you couldn't see it. Of course I was an ass to get in your way—but it never struck me that the others could lam into me afterwards that the service of a lifetime wouldn't addykuttly repay you."

In view of his disgust I naturally apologized. "I'm more sorry than I can addykuttly express, Micky. And—er—of course I don't claim the service of your lifetime. In fact, it looks more as though you could claim mine, as you risked your life to warn me."

"Oh, *that's* all right," said Micky, not quite sure from which angle the service-of-a-lifetime obligation was most painful. "I say, what's up with Babs and mother? And Ned and Pater are queer too—it's about this Munro chap who's coming tomorrow. But they won't tell me what."

Neither did I tell him what. But it would have

been blatantly evident to me, even if I had not remembered my grotesque period of semi-consciousness, that the Setons, with the exception of Micky, were now aware of an event which concerned only Larry Munro and my mother, Felicity Somers.

Unfortunately, I did remember. There was no reprieve for my conscience, self-condemned. Mitigating circumstances, yes, one or two . . . the feverish aggravation of Larry's trespass; and the ensuing concussion which had temporarily sundered control from the wish to the speech.

Nevertheless, had I not beforehand desired so madly and so persistently that Barbara should know about Larry and Felicity, revelation would not have occurred during that pause, when, betwen two stages of complete delirium, I was aware of my inconsequent sayings, though unable to hinder them. And besides . . . why had I all the time feigned unconsciousness had it not been with some sort of idea . . . ?

Guilty! The mitigating circumstances carried no weight at all. They might be left out as far as I was concerned. Guilty. . . . And now I could no longer and never again, feel injured with regard to Larry—only mean—oh, horribly mean. Larry himself, with all his tricks, would never have played me such a trick as this. . . .

The attitude of the Setons aided my scourging self-contempt. Why, with the sentiments she now held towards the young unknown, Kate should not have quite simply disposed of his visit by some

pretext, written or wired, I cannot tell. She probably refrained from a kindly fear that such a procedure would cause me to guess that I, in delirium, had unwittingly damned a friend. . . .

For, of course, I was not informed that I had done any such thing—I suppose they wanted to spare such shock and subsequent grief to my noble and upright nature and gentleman's sense of honour.

"You talked a pack of rubbish and nursery rhymes," Kate answered my tentative inquiry. "None of it any good at all for copy, I'm sorry to say." And Barbara also, hectically, and without her mother's novelistic touch in deception, joked with me about "Tom, Tom, the piper's son. . . ."

The piper's son and his stolen pig were a plausible selection from a sick man's ravings, and came in very useful.

I, it was equally evident, had to remain serenely unaware, unless I were to give myself away, that any information had leaked out to alter their rejoicing over the hitherto welcome guest. It remains a problem unsolved how I should have accounted for this sudden raging and hostility, had I been as sublimely ignorant of my treachery as—Oh God! as I would like to have been!

It was a highly uncomfortable situation before it even started, so to speak; only to be saved by super-discretion on the part of Kate Seton—super-finesse from Barbara.

And these were not their distinguishing qualities.

Kate's fetish was clean manliness. She was trying to bring up her boys to clean manliness; and trusted that Barbara, by marriage, would import more of this desirable element into the home. The Larry-saga, as she first received it compressed into one phrase, must have sounded harsh, to say the least of it.

She had never known Felicity, in whose presence the ugliness and coarseness surmised in the story would not for an instant have been suffered to dwell. She had never heard how two women had held each other close over the body and the memory of the man they had both loved; nor that Felicity, faithful for seventeen years, had only been still faithfully adherent to the same ideal when she met Larry Munro for the second time; neither could she guess how helplessly young the boy had been when his macabre inheritance encompassed him; nor how of late he had rebelled, and brutally—but with clean manliness—shaken himself free; spells and spell-woman exchanged for the quest of a girl like Barbara.

Had K. B. Seton, who was a fine novelist, been aware of all this, Larry might not have had to encounter the vehement bigoted dislike of which my one utterance was productive. Kate, at least, might have been mellowed to partial understanding. Never Barbara. Barbara was obviously making no allowances. To her frank challenging eyes, Felicity was just a fact.

And the fault was mine—I had cheated as well as betrayed—I had lied as well as cheated—there was

no truth in the stark utterance "Larry's mistress is my mother. . . ."

That sort of thing! . . . Barbara had heard of it thousands of times—only it happened to other people, not to oneself, ever. To her, the only outstanding feature of this thoroughly commonplace incident was that it had somehow got entangled with oneself and one's house, and even with one's feelings (Barbara *had* been dreaming of a wonderful Prince Larry!) . . . Horrid fast young man and elderly (horrid) siren. . . . Oh, it was—horrid. Barbara, Ned, and Kate, with Henry to help in the background, set out with the zealous determination to show Master Larry *their* views "on that sort of thing."

I was only surprised that Micky had not been told of the business. But Micky, when a secret was in question, evaded open statement, preferred to prowl round the rim of things, and increase the prevailing uneasiness a hundredfold, before he announced with that glint of sidelong blue between upcurling black lashes, that he knew all about it now, thanks!

I believe the Setons would have been disappointed had Larry's visit been deferred or cancelled. Their antagonism was active and healthy and needed a live victim. So that relief mingled with scorn when, on Saturday morning, a telegram arrived for Mrs. Seton: "Arriving 6.30, St. Catts station, slim and divinely handsome in grey—Larry Munro."

"He must be conceited!" Babs' short upper lip curled like that of a fictional duchess.

"Beastly swanky sort of chap, telling us beforehand what he's going to wear—who cares!" This was Ned.

Then Kate, affixing the label, "Extravagant—signing both names to a telegram—Munro alone would have done quite well."

Finally Henry's contribution, "My opinion is of no value whatever, and you need not assure me that it is; but I submit, nevertheless, that the young man must have meant a portion of his telegram to be a joke."

"Bravo, Henry!" I murmured inwardly. The ridiculous wire had made me smile, and yet caused a pang—the sender was so buoyantly confident of his welcome.

"Anyway, who's going to meet him?" demanded Micky, lazily letting down the deck chair in which Ned sprawled.

"Not me!"

"You met Kevin!"

"Kevin would like to drive in to meet his own friends, though," a little flickering smile in my direction.

"Not well enough." I certainly had no desire to encounter Larry a second before I was forced to it. "Besides, I didn't invite him."

"Mums invited him. Mums, you've got to drive into St. Catts for him."

"With three buxom children and a husband—and I a decrepit old woman, with the last chapters of a

book to write, and dinner to get? No. Certainly not. Henry——"

Henry gave us to understand, with the usual preamble of self-depreciation, that his services would certainly be required in attendance on the favourite guinea-pig this very day, because——

"That will do, Henry."

"My dear Kate, if among these enlightened young people I mayn't mention such elemental matters as birth and death——"

"Death, as much as you please," said his wife. "Your guinea-pig is dying—is that it?"

Henry was disposed to argue.

"Anyway," Kate cut him short, "Ned and Micky are driving the pony into St. Catts this evening."

"Ned is jolly well not doing anything of the sort. I can't stand this Munro rotter."

"Why? It isn't as if you knew him yet," Barbara made a conscientious effort to play up to the presence of Micky and myself.

"No; but *you know what I mean!*"—in italics.

Had I not been so poignantly involved, it would have been an excellent diverting spectacle to watch the Setons in the process of manœuvring a delicate situation. As it was, though I loathed the necessity for further histrionics on my part, it seemed I could not let pass what should have been to me an incomprehensible condemnation of Larry, without evincing some natural astonishment. I evinced it.

Their excuse was the telegram. Kate, metaphorically, grabbed at the telegram, and the others followed her lead; . . . they had been prepared to like their guest, to welcome him heartily, till he had "put them off" by his intolerable message. With "Tom, Tom, the piper's son," that telegram became a useful property to the Setons.

"Micky, dear old boy, dear little brother," coaxed Barbara, "*you* wanted to go into St. Catts anyhow to get that oiled silk for covering the model aeroplane. The station is on your way——"

But Kate interrupted with a decisive: "I'd rather Micky did *not* go."

Followed a short, wordless contest between mother and daughter, in which the latter tried to communicate that Micky, not in the secret as regards Larry's discreditable past, could have no valid reason for refusing the errand; while Kate retorted, equally without sound, that she did not intend exposing her cherub to an hour's solitary corruption.

I doubt if either succeeded as I did in interpreting the other. They were not by nature fashioned for speech under cover of silence.

But whether silently or in speech, it was a nightmare, incredible, and yet dreadfully familiar, to listen to Larry discussed, Larry's name, here in Cornwall, in Porthgollan, in The Shoe, among the Setons, where, because I had set up sanctuary, I had most dreaded the intrusion, most often anticipated it, most strenuously denied the possibility.

"Thomas shall fetch him from the station," was the conclusion arrived at. Thomas was the blacksmith's son, aged eight, whom I had once publicly miscalled Tommy and had been publicly reproved by his mother: "Thomas, ef you please—Tommy du be tu old fur un yet awhile!"

"Yes, Thomas can drive in for him." They would have deputed the cat to do so, if feasible.

Larry was expected about half-past seven P. M. Our usual supper time at The Shoe meandered evasively between eight and nine o'clock. But Mrs. Seton said quite plausibly that Mr. Munro would be hungry from his long drive in an open cart through the soaking rain. So we all began the meal sharply at 7.30 without him.

I was poignantly aware of a vacant place at the table, just opposite my own.

Also of atmospheric conditions at ominous high pressure.

And of Barbara, in the faded grey-green tatters from which she had declined to change, but with her wontedly tossed and straying hair wound in a plait round her small bronze head, which in its revealed shapeliness, was conspicuously Barbara's "best point."

The soft lines of her throat were a girl's insolent challenge to an unknown woman shadowed behind an unknown man . . . or so I read it.

Steady rain drenching the stiff ruts of the lane to a smother of mud that would prevent us from hearing

the cart from the station draw up outside. At any moment. . . . Obstinate in refusal to let Larry actually as well as symbolically thrust me out, I now swore at myself for not having returned to London that morning, after all.

The kitchen door opened straight on to the path to the gate. The path, also spongy, would allow no footstep to sound upon it.

But perhaps the click of the gate. . . .

I was in extreme sympathy with the electric mood of a cat, when for no apparent reason save nerves—which of course the cat could conquer if it chose not to give way—it tears madly up and down with every separate hair stiff and tingling. Such exercise, expressive of catastrophe, must be tremendous relief to the cat. . . .

Was that wheels?

My unease communicated itself to Micky. Though he was probably the only outcast from secret knowledge at that table—state of dewy innocence that Kate, Henry, Barbara and Ned likewise assigned to me! —yet I sensed him more than the others on the jump . . . and I silently conceded to his proud mother that Micky *might* be slightly Psychic.

In addition to a fine salad of mixed emotions, I added a slice of anger with the Setons for beginning supper without their guest—I remembered how Felicity in her worst hour had made welcome Miss Beech and Miss Hilda Beech.

A voice from the lane called: "Whoa!"

"You've spoilt your entrance, Larry," to myself. For all the Setons had heard, and were staring hard at the door.

But though stock effective, it was not such a bad entrance, after all. Trust Larry! Door flung impetuously open; and silhouetted against a background of darkness and whimpering rain and faint goblin outline of cart, pony, and Thomas, stood a slight figure, cap in hand, overcoat sparkling with tiny drops in the lamplight. . . . Oh, not at all bad!

Then only it occurred to me that my presence there must be sheer surprise to Larry—Was it? I could not remember the chaos of events successively—

"Hullo, Kev!"

Apparently not. Larry's greeting was quite cool and self-possessed; his grin irresistibly friendly. In spite of a quick memory of what it felt like when a bladder whacked the back of my head, I calmly twinkled back. . . . "Hullo, Larry!"

For the flash of a second it seemed astoundingly as though we understood one another down to the last fraction of complexity, and were allied in appreciation of the joke.

Then I introduced him.

The Setons each asserted afterwards that they took an instant dislike to the personality of the new-comer. Nor could I argue that they were hardly in an unprejudiced frame of mind. For then—flushing very red—they would have retorted that they knew nothing

beforehand——what indeed *could* they know?—to the detriment of Mr. Munro. And I, shackled to ignorance, must perforce acknowledge them right, curse my delirium (or lack of it)—curse Larry—a special brand for Larry as usual!—curse the Setons—the whole idiot set of complications. . . .

"It was when he took off his coat and I saw his grey suit," explained Barbara, "it reminded me of the telegram, and I detest a dandy——"

Yes—that was it—it reminded *all* of them of the telegram. (Thanks, Babs, for the cue!)—and they all detested a dandy . . . and showed it!

But Larry had come prepared to be liked; and for a short while before he grasped and readjusted his manners to hostility, he behaved like one who was confidently prepared to be liked. In superb high spirits, he swung forward his eager intimacy in their direction, instead of advancing it with the tentative demeanour of a criminal—as, of course, he should have done. K. B. Seton, to whom was his primary allegiance paid, covered her lack of cordiality by a brisk attention to material details:

"Take off your coat and hang it near the fire—you're wet through. What about Thomas? I hope he knows that we want the cart presently to take Mr. Munro and his luggage to Tremerrith? Or—Ned you can drive over after supper, and drop Mr. Munro, and take the cart back to the 'Red Deer,' can't you? Tell Thomas he needn't wait, and give him sixpence; Micky, take Mr. Munro to Kevin's room for a wash.

I'm sorry we can't put you up here, but this is a very small cottage, and we're packed as it is; Tremerrith is only three fields away and a bit up the lane, and Mrs. Chubbe will be sure to make you comfortable. You come here for all your meals, of course. Which reminds me that you must be starving; Babs—pie—oven—hurry up!" and Kate subtracted herself from futher concern with the arrival.

The alacrity on the negative side, with which Ned, Micky, and Babs obeyed their mother's commands, may have accounted for Larry's air of good-humoured conviction, as he turned to me an hour later at the gate of Tremerrith, and said: "What absolutely abominable children!"

Ned had driven Larry round by the road, while I walked across the three fields and met the cart outside the gate of Mrs. Chubbe's cottage.

I listened, without reply, to the retreating jangle of the cart.

"That boy—what's his name—Ned?—seems to have got it into his bumpkin head that I'm a puny coward type. We had an eerie drive through blackness and rain through a lane with ruts like mountains . . . the cart climbed 'em painfully and dropped splashing into the pools collected either side . . . nearly bumped us out and drowned us each time. And he lashed the pony like a madman; I'd have gracefully alighted and walked or swum, but we were surrounded, back and front, by a formal procession

of muttering bullocks—yes, honestly, Kev, they *did* mutter, scowling with their heads down, like Socialist workmen before a strike; and I don't see why I should be bullied into walking arm-in-arm with a Socialist bullock through two feet of mud and two of water—on my first night here."

Ned, infernal young scoundrel, had obviously brought the cart through a carefully selected lane, instead of by the road.

"He hoped to see you behave badly," I explained briefly.

"And shriek: 'Lemme get out—I'm frightened'? —Yes, I grasped that was his fond idea, from the way he kept on looking at me." Larry laughed, and threw his boots into a corner of the room. "It was deuced uncomfortable, that's all. And I expect the rude little schoolgirl will be glad to hear that it's about done for my 'elegance' "; ruefully holding the candle to survey himself.

Barbara, when at supper he signified intention of climbing down into a certain precarious blow-hole mentioned by Ned, had replied scornfully: "You'd better stop away from the rocks altogether, or you'll ruin your elegance—people aren't expected to wear those sort of clothes in Cornwall, you know," anxious to prove herself impervious to his fascinations from the beginning, and to make him well acquainted with the fact.

"As it happens, I've a sweater and some bags in

my suit case," Larry answered her gently—"But people aren't expected to wear those sort of clothes on a journey, you know. Or didn't you?"

"—Rude little schoolgirl! What's her hair up for? I'll pull it down!"

And he said it exactly like a rude little schoolboy, sitting on the side of the bed, and with an injured air caressing one grey silk foot. But I drew no comfort from the spurting conflict; it was merely plain that the courtship of Larry and Barbara, already hotly conscious one of the other, was to be conducted on lines of a very juvenile Katherine and Petruchio.

By the evening of the next day the Setons had conclusively proved to Larry that their treatment of him was deliberate, and not their wonted characteristic way with a guest. Their method of proof was my punishment for spoiling his reception: they exploited me sickeningly as their own good boy—a lay figure, usefully at hand to emphasize a contrast. Barbara, Ned, and Micky ostentatiously sought my company and deferred to my wishes; Kate pampered me with first helpings of chicken-breast; I had all the privileges of "quite one of the family," mingled with the consideration due to an honoured visitor. It was roses, roses all the way and myrtle mixed in my path like mad—simply damnable! I saw Larry smile once or twice at a particularly blatant bit of favouritism pointedly directed, but he made no comment when we were alone together—a rare occurrence since my sudden popularity. There was no escape

from a ridiculous predicament, unless by confessing to Barbara that I had not been as unconscious as she believed me to be on a certain occasion. And indeed, in sheer dislike of my present helplessness, I might have so exposed myself to her contempt, had it not involved that Larry should hear what I had done for him. . . . And this I dreaded more than anything else. More than I had dreaded his arrival. More than I dreaded to see Barbara in his arms—I cannot tell why.

My attic was separated by only a board partition from the bedroom in which Kate Seton and Barbara never slept. One gusty evening, however, they were driven from their garden roosts and hammocks to indoor refuge—excepting only Micky, who first protestingly, and then miserably resigned, was as usual left sternly shelved in the wind-blown, rain-buffeted pig-sty, without even the solace of his mother martyred in the bunk below him. And that night I heard a fragment of talk between Babs and her mother—

"—And go on pretending we like him, or that we don't know things about him? It's not straight. I want to tell him right out that he's a beast and ought to be ashamed and we hate him—Why shouldn't I?"

"When you're a woman of the world, Barbara my dear, you'll learn that I convey more reproof by an imperceptible hint of coldness in my manner——"

"But it's not *straight*," the child's voice rang out again, passionate, vehement. "A sort of fumbling. . . . Oh, I don't know. But I shan't be able to

keep myself much longer from having it out with him —and it's fairer too!"

"To Larry. But to Kevin?"

In the silence that followed, I opened my door twice and banged it again, to warn them of my vicinity. I smiled at Kate Seton deluding herself with the notion of "imperceptible hints," which were not unlike a volley of bricks directed at Larry's provocative head. And then I realized Barbara's threat: "I shan't be able to keep myself much longer from having it out with him."

Oh Babs, beloved little Babs, how I should like to grip you by the shoulders, and shake you, and shake you, till I had shaken out some of your unsophisticated policy of justice and fairness, your exasperating shattering certainty that all matters can be easily adjusted by a mere act of "having it out," your crude disregard of all delicate manners and tolerance and convenience and tact. . . . Barbara, maid of honour in its truest sense—Barbara whom I worship, tonight I could well-nigh murder you and not be sorry, just to teach you, little fool Barbara, to think, to be sorry and kind before you are pure and scornful, to forgive, to understand—and to mind your own business!

All of which vindictive denunciation of Barbara meant that my own burnt and blistered conscience was paining me to frenzy.

I believe that Barbara was not only capable of fulfilling her threat to "have it out" with Larry, but

that she was incapable of refraining from it. I was able to ward off the imminent disclosure by preventing Larry and Barbara from ever being a minute alone together—not an easy task, for I had to manœuvre without apparent purpose; and though Barbara helped me by pointed distaste for Larry's society, he rather sought out hers, with the mocking air of being perfectly conversant of an attitude which afforded him immense pleasure.

Warfare between them, formerly intermittent, was now incessant; they were at it sword and dagger, cudgel and quarter-staff; Micky and Ned backing up their sister; Mrs. Seton unscrupulously detaching herself from all responsibility towards her visitor; Henry occasionally strolling into the fray on the side of his offspring. Larry, solitary and dangerous, with that gentleness upon his tongue, and that yellow sparkle in his faun's eyes, which rendered him so vitally attractive—Larry, though he betrayed no astonishment at the surrounding belligerence, must surely have wondered what it was all about, and why I maintained throughout my apparently naïve and fatuous position of neuter.

Some time and soon there was bound to be speech between myself and Larry . . . significant, disconcerting speech; but not before there was revelation between Larry and Barbara—how soon?

Under that black archway of rocks high as the cliffs . . . that was where I had caught my final glimpse of them: Barbara and Larry, tiny

doll figures, grotesquely a-swing on what appeared to be a smooth surface, till they dropped from sight down a seeming abyss—I was tired and knew I could not follow, tired of keeping pace with their tireless scramble—they must not be left—not a moment, or Barbara would "have it out" with Larry . . . as she was having it out with him now, somewhere among these giant crags and needles on the island beyond the last archway.

I gave in. The rocks had been inimical to me from the very start of this morning's expedition. And that was queer, because hitherto I had felt upon rocks that boundless certainty of tread, as well as that sense of rest and home and all's well, which is wont mysteriously to grip a man in one particular element and no other—on the sea or upon moors or else in mountains. Rocks beneath my feet brought a familiar sensation of suppleness and poise; I knew—just knew—not uncannily but as a simple matter of course, exactly how to correct a slip of the body or limb by a lightning adjustment to any unexpected writhe or jut of the boulders. I could cope, laughing, with the fair deception of an apparently outgoing tide, that was in reality licking up a strip of white sand round the next bend and behind the last bend; or with the veined and polished serpentine, fatal in its almost invisible cloak of slippery weed. I recognized the separate perils of granite rock that crumbled at a clutch; of slate rock that broke sharply, cutting the skin; of barnacle-rock, that offered at the same time

safety and agony to the clinging soul. There was no end to the friendliness of the Atlantic shore when once it had adopted you; no end to its variety show of low-hooded caves with swinging green floor; caves that might be swum or precariously paddled, till a sombre black pool, bottomless and untwinkling, sent you plunging back to the sun-watched entrance; quiet lagoons, closing to a meandering creek where the rocks bulged to a roof above your crouching head; opening again to a chain of glittering puddles, purple and pink and emerald; no end to the orchestral music of waters fretting plaintively through a channel too narrow for their impetuous entrance, spitting out in dazzling fury from a hole unsuspected; hissing down like hail from their own tossed height. Yet the sea, and its sounds, and its motley draperies of weed and shell, and its darting wriggling shadow population, was to me only an accessory of its own wild shore-boundaries . . . which point of view would no doubt cause surprise to the born sailor; just as my treatment of moor and meadow and brown earth existing as a mere wide fringe running down and down and down till it met that strip of conflict that I loved best, would be a novel and distasteful aspect of the case to the typical landsman. Sea was too restless, and knew too many adherents. Land was too stolid, and could too easily be divided into property. But rock-territory, in its unclaimed loneliness, the end and the beginning and the neither-nor; the very rim of island; the edge of the map, where in old lesson

days the paint-brush dipped in cobalt followed so painfully an unmeaning squiggle of scoop and headland; rock-territory, sturdy and undeniable to the memory even while the tide, moon-ordered, slipped over it and submerged it wholly; elusive and phantasmagoric to the sight even while the tide, moon-ordered, stripped it again and left it pale and grey and slavvered in night-black; rock-territory, all colours, all surprises, all promises; rock-territory, like a fantastic semi-frightening dream shaped into visible form; rock-territory was mine; and on it I was happy—till now.

But today the rocks had changed their temper.

Common sense urged that I was still too convalescent to have attempted such a strenuous expedition; and that the humiliation of head and body submissive to rock-tyranny, where they had previously been conquerors, was from entirely natural causes. But common sense could not survive the spectacle of Larry and Barbara all the time well in my van, calling to me, pausing for me; taking the besetting obstacles of our progress with so careless a stride, with such an unconsciously flamboyant exhibition of their nervous young strength, that I was driven to wonder if my own increasing difficulties of giddiness and uncertain foothold were imagination; to wonder, irritably, if I were indeed already senile? The type of envious decrepit creature who cannot bear tranquilly the sight of youth and fitness leaping ahead.

"Wait for Kevin!"

"Come on, old man. Don't keep us all night."

In a vile humour I struggled and stumbled in their wake, over a portion of rough beach that was new to me; towards a great chain of rock doorways each as tall and taller than the very cliffs, built at right angles from the cliffs, far out to sea. In better moments I might have found it a fairy spectacle. . . . Atlantis suddenly risen from the ocean and hurled in opaque grey and fig-purple and indigo against the taut sapphire sky; unreality fading to its final impermanence in a foam-lapped island, sentinelled by two jagged columns lifted high from the green sea; a last roofless portal after three arches perfect and complete. . . .

Well, I was in no mood for Atlantis and bewitchment; Brighton pier would have suited me better.

"Come on, Kev!"

I hoisted myself on to a ledge; some goblin must have greased it. . . . I slid—threw up my left hand and grabbed at a hold that slowly and joyfully crumbled. Yet I swear Larry and Barbara must have come over this barrier of points and chasms in odd marbled yellow. There was no alternative passage to the first archway. My other fingers had, without conscious volition, fastened on to security, though forcing my body to a twisted dangle in mid-air —I kicked about for a shelf to stand upon—found none—my arm was already numb. There *was* some-

thing resourceful to be done, of course; some quick, nimble way out of the predicament. But . . . plop of the brown sea-grapes as my chest scraped them against the rock—but I was wholly at a loss—curse this dinging in my ears!—in an alien element—alien territory—rock territory. . . .

"Put your heel here—to your right—no—wait! I'll guide it!—*here!*" My foot was lifted and firmly wedged into a crevice whence I could obtain leverage to ease the strain on my one arm. Then Barbara—yes, it was she who had come to the rescue—Barbara said casually. "All right now, aren't you?" and rejoined Larry, running back towards us.

"How *could* I guess? He's always been a first-rate climber; far better than I," I heard him explain in defence to some reproach of hers which I was not near enough to catch.

"But he's been ill!" indignantly.

Larry shrugged his shoulders. His gaze roamed down the line of arches, and stayed, fascinated.

"I must get out to that island—is it concrete fact, or is it just one's inner vision thrown out to sea when one happens to say the word 'island' to oneself softly? . . . I shouldn't be in the very slightest degree surprised to hear that neither of you saw it."

"We can both see a chunk broken off from the mainland, without rhapsodizing, I suppose?" I found it a relief to be surly. But Larry merely repeated, "I must get out to that island—can it be done?" to Barbara, who replied eagerly, "It's just

passable by the lowest tides; Ned discovered a way; we might manage it now if we made a dash for it."

"Come along, then. Look here, Kev, you'd better sit down and smoke your eternal pipe. We won't be very long."

"I'm coming too," in my most dogged voice.

The rocks had deserted me; Larry was their god and master and comrade now. Larry, with Barbara beside him. Even the rocks . . . I was getting maudlin in my endeavour not to betray the strain of following the difficult trail of the pair who must not be left alone—must not be left alone—or she would tell him. . . .

Barbara, hectically desiring my company, said: "Yes, come along; I'll help you over the nasty places."

But it was a wry prospect to be helped by Barbara, up and down interminably, up those stark black precipices and down those horribly smooth gulfs; always with the huge archways overhead hollowing the sound of our voices, disguising the gulls' cry to human anguish; with the streaked and sickly rocks needling a flat, blue-purple background; streams of cold air; the suck of invisible breakers from below and round about, swirling hoarsely to meet us, booming sullenly in our rear. . . . And feet that slipped and slipped. . . . Rock-territory was now more than hostile; it was nightmare.

I shook my head; sat down and filled my pipe, as bidden.

"We shan't be long," Larry repeated reassuringly. Barbara sat down beside me, and dug her toes obstinately into the sand. "I'm not keen on going. Let's give it up. There's a sort of three-inch sloping gangway we should have to cross, just under the dip by the last arch, before we jump over to the island; there's no take-off—it always frightens me. I'll stop with Kev."

Barbara's tact was a gruesome thing. Nor was I complimented by her choice to remain behind. She hated Larry; undoubtedly liked me best. But her liking was with blunt feelers. . . . All her vitality was only aware of Larry; responsive, though in hatred; thrilling to him, though in scorn and intolerance.

"Well, take me to see the gangway, and we'll chuck the island. Of course, as it's a dangerous transit, I don't dream of allowing you to attempt it."

Larry's well-timed bout of authority had the desired effect of immediately sending Barbara in the direction of the last arch.

"Babs! Babs! Perhaps we'd better not even *look* at it . . ." gracelessly he spurred her on—her slim legs and flying hair darted from my view; and then his sweater sharply white for an instant against a sawn-out triangle of dark peacock sea. I was alone. They would not come back—just yet. Not till the tension of the past days was violently snapped. Not till Barbara had enlightened him as to why he was an unwelcome guest, "Kevin told us——"

He was hearing it now—somewhere hidden among the vast craggy masonry. I started in the direction they had gone—stared. . . .

Presently I went home. Nothing was to be gained by waiting; and I did not care to see them return together; there had been that in Larry's following gaze after the girl, which was neither mirth nor battle. . . .

The rocks were tolerably kind again—now.

Larry and Barbara walked in halfway through supper—he very pale, and she flushed, and conspicuously intent on something alive she carried in the palm of her hand.

"It's a baby field-mouse—I found him at the foot of a slope, squealing for his mother; he must have rolled down, and—oh, Mummy, he's still blind, the darling!"

Kate and Ned and Micky crowded round her—they were all fanatical animal lovers, and Barbara even more so than the rest. She pored lovingly over the tiny grey creature, in its improvised bed of cotton-wool, coaxing it to lick a little warm milk off her finger. To be nearer her tender, absorbed face, I joined the group, and offered "Nebuchadnezzar" as a befitting title for the new baby.

"Neb—oh, Neb, you've got such a delicious wee pink tongue—Micky, you don't think he'll die of being indoors, do you? Ought I perhaps to take him back and hunt for his mother? I couldn't bear to hurt him——"

Larry laughed outright, lounging apart from us all, against the staircase, at the far end of the room. She could not bear to hurt the field-mouse!—Barbara's look at him was spun of quivering fury, and Kate Seton said coldly, "Mr. Munro is tired of waiting for his supper. Come back to the table, children—the mouse is all right for the moment."

But the laugh scraped my guilty nerve painfully—so Babs had given him a bad time.

I was so sick of my part of unconscious breeziness—insensibility to an atmosphere that was almost visible in its opacity. . . . Dead sick of it. But it would certainly play itself out this evening . . . things were beginning to happen violently, and pretence was toppling to right and left—Babs had decreed it so; Babs saw no reason for pretence.

She and Larry were in wild spirits for the remainder of the meal. He looked like an alert and wrathful young faun—and his vengeful insolence on the Setons for their rudeness of days had a point and a sting pointing clearly, to me at least, that now he was informed of the cause.

"I've finished the book!" K. B. Seton announced suddenly. "The last chapters are a sheer waste—I was demoralized just at the critical stages——" This was for Larry . . . how she disliked him! "As for you, my daughter, you were such a failure as the heroine that I've sent you back to school on the last page but one!"

"Mummy, I *wish* you wouldn't put me in your novels. You'd know how uncomfortable it was, if somebody did it once to you!"

"Every author's family gets butchered to make a publisher's holiday," retorted her mother, tranquilly ladling out custard.

"I believe I shall use you up in a book one day, Barbara," mused Larry.

"What will you call it?" For an instant pleased curiosity put her off the defensive.

"The China-shop!"

Dear little Micky chortled, "I see! you mean that Babs is a sort of bull!"

"The whole world's a china-shop, and innocence is the bull," I supplied sententiously—to give the girl time to recover from the buffet. "Put that on your title-page, Larry."

"What about 'ignorance' for 'innocence'?"

"Not so pretty."

"It won't be a pretty book."

"It won't ever be a book at all!" Barbara returned headlong to the fray. "You only talked about it for effect. That sort of speechifying is part of your—your theatrical equipment."

It was a taunt delivered at random; she hadn't heard of Larry Munro, the romantic actor. And behind her wrestling anger, she stood forth, the one very young girl in the world, symbolizing a whole army of hoydens, frank and sweet and challenging: in their name she demanded that their mates shall

bring them first love like their own, as clear and as wondering; hotly disappointed, wilfully intolerant of the women-robbers who have been beforehand to spoil for them their young and passionate adventure. . . . "And Kevin's *mother*, too!" added Barbara's personal condemnation.

And silently, desperately, Larry pleaded back for the men: "Ah, do, please, understand better than that. We knew about you all the time, but we dared not trust to our luck; you might have been an illusion and then we should have had nothing. We weren't as vicious or as horrid and depraved as you imagine—only young cowards who dared not believe that what we wanted could ever come true. The divine thing is spoilt—we've spoilt it for ourselves. And you don't even begin to understand how hard it is. . . ."

"And what does it matter whose mother she was?" answering Barbara's scornful postscript—"She was just a woman who loved me. You've won without even trying—can't you be generous?"

Meanwhile: "You're never natural for one moment, are you?" Barbara went on, resuming the covering attack—obviously in their intense consciousness one of the other, they could not refrain from mutual badgering. "Don't you ever get sick of being a mountebank? Or haven't you noticed yet how it jars on us? We found it fairly amusing at first."

"Ned, it's time that you and Barbara did some solid holiday reading; you've idled long enough!" Mrs. Seton regarded her daughter with anxious eyes, aware that some catastrophic shattering of china-ware must have occurred to have brought the girl to such an emotional pitch. She glanced questioningly at me—I opposed a blank front. But indeed we were all listening acutely, but with ears variously attuned, to the echoes of a recent smash. . . . Micky interjected thoughtfully: "Isn't it somehow funny to think that today a week ago Larry was a stranger to us?" The remark sounded irrelevant, but could best have been interpreted as a significant comment on his family's easy manners on short acquaintance. Nobody took any apparent notice of Micky; and I asked Barbara of what her holiday reading consisted.

"Ned's is for his matric, isn't it?"

"Yes—but I passed mine last year, so I'm ahead. Only I can't just do nothing at all in London—it's so dull during the day, even if I go to a dance every night," hopefully. "There's Art, of course—but I haven't quite made up my mind just what sort of art I'm going to study."

"Then why not study the art of welcoming a guest?" Delicately, deliberately, Larry broke this selected item of china. It was so done that there was no excuse for one of us to ignore the crash and the after-silence. . . . Larry was leaning a little forward from his seat, rather mournfully smiling at Barbara, who sat next to me—but his eyes made me think

of goat-legs prancing. . . . I wondered if it would be possible for anybody at that table ever to speak again. . . .

Henry Seton's voice, exuberantly trumpeting from the threshold of the garden door, solved the problem: "Kate! Kate! Congratulate me! My guinea-pig has just given birth to seven little guinea-pigs!"

His wife, under stress of the situation, startled him by the lack of womanly sympathy displayed in her retort.

"Well," she snapped, "you didn't suppose it would give birth to seven little alligators, did you?"

[10]

And after that the evening became syncopated. The dislocation in the rhythm, the stop and the missed beat and the forward jerk, attributable to those uneasy seconds when one or the other of us remembered that the other had or had not been told of what ourselves were secretly aware and the third person dubitably knew—or not, if the other after all were only pretending to knowledge, or had not, as suspected, betrayed a confidence. . . .

Thus Mrs. Seton to herself: "What has that young libertine been saying to my Barbara this afternoon? Is he attracted by her? Does she care a snap of the fingers for him? No—certainly not. And yet—she's disgracefully over-excited. Is this going to spoil my nice plan for her and Kevin? I

shall be extremely annoyed if it does. Has Babs let out that Kevin let out about his mother? And has Kevin himself any idea that anything is wrong anywhere? Gracious Heaven! If only people were a little more indecently communicative, none of this ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay need have occurred —I'm sure it's upsetting Micky, psychically. Well, well, I suppose it will make quite a good book one day and that's all that need matter to me. But decidedly this evening hasn't done its damndest with us yet. . . ."

And Micky. . . . "Yes—wait a minute—I *believe* I've got it all parcelled up and sealed and addressed, now: This Munro chap is keen on Babs, and she's just sprung on him that she and Mums and Ned and the pater know he's a rotter. What do they know? That's not important—but *how* did they know? Quite simple. . . . Kevin told them. Not like Kev, though, to mess up another fellow's chances. . . . No—wait a minute—he must have spouted it by accident after he fell on his head. And they're keeping that from him. But he knows, all the same—I sort of *feel* he knows—he's only faking this what-the-dickens-is-up-with-you-all stunt. . . . I must watch Kevin very, very carefully . . . for the moment he's more interesting than Larry. But I'd better not let Mums see that I've twigged anything wrong, or she'll send me to bed and foozle the whole caboodle. I *must* see what happens this evening, . . . though it's a horrid

evening . . . horrid. . . . I—I almost want to howl. . . ."

"I was right—I was right—I *know* I was right to have it out with him—why should I consider his feelings? That sort of man is a beast . . . we decided long ago at school that we girls need jolly well not put up with that sort of thing in a man. . . And Ned says he's a bounder too. Only I hope he won't tell that I've told what Kevin told, because it's a shame to make Kevin miserable just when he's in such good spirits. . . . I *like* Kevin. . . . Will Nebuchadnezzar live through the night, the darling? Oh, he mustn't, he mustn't die—Ought I to have brought him home? Ought I to have said . . . *that*, on the island? Larry was frightfully rude at supper—I'll never forgive him! Much he cares! If only he hadn't come this summer. And yet . . . mother's so headlong, inviting him like that. Has mother guessed that I've been such an idiot? No, I wasn't an idiot, I was right, perfectly right. The boys will say so, and they'd have said so at school. But this evening's queer and I wish it were safely over. . . ." Barbara's mental tumult was all too candidly expressed in her riotous behaviour; in her eyes, more grey than blue tonight, questioning, sorrowful, lightening to fury.

Only Larry's state of mind was to me an interrogation—he was no Seton, and I could not read him like a Seton. He seemed the only one of us not

desperately straining to have crossed the dangerous zone of the next few hours; out of his climax of popular disgrace had oddly crept an evanescent element of popular favour; he sounded one tune for all of us—it was syncopation.

How else to describe the apparently inconsequent result on our action, of various sets of over-excited nerves jerking and pinging? We rioted in groups, and separately, and discordantly against each other, or in rare harmonious spasms of unity. We bawled choruses sufficiently out of date and forgotten to give youngsters the satisfactory yearning melancholy of having passed beyond the threshold of their youth! We scuffled; swarmed up and down the stairway, from kitchen to garden, and back again; capered madly in rag time and no time and any time; burlesqued melodrama and pathos—"There's a broken-hearted widow tends the grave of mahdd Currew"—this was Larry as a tenth-rate platform elocutionist——

"Shut up, Larry—she's been tending that old grave now since a quarter-past eight!"

"Well—geraniums and calceolarias do need to be properly planted and regularly watered, if they're to make any sort of a show!—'And the yellow gahdd looks down upon it arl. . . .'" He had scrambled on to the high stone rim of the well just outside the wide-swung kitchen door, squatted with an evil, immobile grin just showing above his hunched knees: "Tableau:

the one-eyed yellow idol, yellowly exultant. . . . Tableau: Rachel waiting for Jacob—" with a swift change of personality he stood shyly expectant, arms upraised to support a great earthenware pitcher upon his shoulder. A mountebank, Barbara had called him? . . . well, for the first time since knowing Larry Munro, I was reminded that the first Larry Munro had been a famous actor.

"Kev, come and be Jacob—d'you think I can wait here all day?"

"You can wait seven years, while Jacob carries on with Leah behind the tent-door," I said. "That's the Bible up to date."

"Short scena in a few vigorous cantos: The Return of Rachel from the Well, or A Sister to a Sister," Larry announced. " 'Ello, dearie . . ." his tone compounded in equal parts of beeriness and honeydew, became at once reminiscent of a certain popular comedian—"Any one called while I've been fetchin' in a drop o' water?"

"Water!—so *you* say!"

"There now! Look for yourself, you nosy thing. Never satisfied, are you? Think I spend my time at the ' Palm and Concubine ' like you do?"

"What's a concubine?" shrilled Micky, deeply enjoying the performance.

"A species of Eastern vegetation now extinct, Micky," I threw in an explanatory aside—"Been long enough, anyway."

"I may have been passin' the time of day with some

one. I'm sure shut up all day here with you and Pa——"

"Might have had more chance of meeting the some one you mean if you'd stopped quiet at home and not stood about in the sun spoilin' what complexion you've got, Rachel *dear*."

"Has Mr. Jacob been—an' gone?" in violent consternation.

I smirked, as I am certain Leah would have smirked.

"Oh, you sly thing. . . ."

"I can't very well help it, can I, if he finds it agreeable to drop in for a bit of a chat while you're out. . . But I'm sorry you should have *waited* at the well, dearie!"

At this juncture of the vituperation, Rachel hurled herself upon Leah, and the scena terminated in a wild-flung medley of arms and legs.

"I can't have Micky miseducated in the Scriptures in this fashion," expostulated Micky's mother; "go to bed, my youngest."

"Oh, *Mums!* Mayn't I sleep indoors tonight?"

"No, my son."

"Mums, am I never going to sleep in a bed again?"

"I cannot tell, my son. Probably not."

Micky sighed. "I'd like to stop up and see Larry and Kev do more Bible pictures."

"It's a most excellent method of impressing the Scriptures on Micky's mind, Mrs. Seton. We'll work up a complete Revue on those lines, called: 'Try It

In Your Bath!'—attractive title, that! Ought to draw the masses. Scene two: Joseph and Potiphar's wife —Kev, you can be Joseph, since you show such talent. Scene, the pantry—Joseph conscientiously counting the currants. Enter Mrs. Potiphar. . . . The audience had better come along to the pantry—this is to be a realistic spectacle."

From Potiphar's wife in semi-Egyptian garb, Larry had presently whirled the entire company into the hysteria of dressing-up. Attired as that insolent young scapegrace, Rupert of Hentzau, he initiated Micky, whom he had coaxed off the threatened banishment to bed, into the stage technicalities of the death-duel between Rupert and Rudolf Rassendyll.

"I once knew a Rupert who snicked a bit off Rudolf's ear in the excitement of a first-night."

"On purpose?"

"Lord, no! not rehearsed it often enough, I suppose."

"But"—Micky's lashes curled up in astonished enquiry—"when people fight on the stage, do they rehearse it *beforehand?* I mean—I thought——"

He was interrupted by scoffing shouts from his elders.

"Oh, Micky, you fathead!" guffawed his brother. "Why, they jolly well have to practise till they get every stroke word-perfect. Look here, Munro, bet you can't do this!" seizing a weapon and making passes at a ham which dangled from the raftered ceiling.

"Nevertheless, there's a lot to be said for Micky's idea of haphazard stage-duelling," laughed Larry, easily disarming Ned. "From the actor's point of view, it lends a fine gambling element. Imagine Henry Ainley making his entrance with the glorious uncertainty upon him as to whether he'll live to make an exit; and Robert Loraine never quite sure if he or the eleven-hired-ruffians-who-set-upon-him are going to emerge victorious, *even* though he's the hero!"

Kate suggested that Micky's principle might be elongated further: "A rubber of bridge upon the stage, for instance, would be far more interesting to the actors if instead of having it all cut-and-dried, they don't know how the cards will be dealt, or what points are to be scored, or how long the rubber may last; if the audience are bored bye-and-bye, let 'em rise and go home!"

But I lazily negatived the application of this new principle to all contingencies: "Too much nervous strain altogether. In social drama as played up to date, is Irene Vanbrugh, cowering, white-faced, behind the bedroom door, never to know from night to night whether her brute of a husband is going to smash through that panel or not? She'd be a wreck by the hundredth performance.

"Kevin, my dear boy, your conversation is not fit for the young; if you can't look divinely appropriate in the costume of a Spanish buccaneer without getting demoralized, I shall have to send Micky to bed."

"Ow—ow—ow!" yelped Micky, dodging up the stairs, and reeling from contact with Barbara, who leapt upon us from the upper floor, arrayed in pale green stockings and trunks (I suspected part of a bathing-costume), a white frilled shirt, a broad yellow sash, and a yellow silk kerchief knotted carelessly round her head.

"I'm a desperado pirate!" she announced, in braggadocio emulation of Larry and myself, swaggering natives of Ruritanian drama and the Spanish Main.

. . . And she looked more than ever an ideal vision of young English maidenhood, exquisitely fresh and lissom, dainty and sedate. . . . Larry and I gazed at her in silence, but K. B. Seton quite frankly remarked—

"Not you, my dear! A thoroughly nice girl from the Vicarage is all you'll manage to pull off—in your appearance, anyway."

"Mother!" with crimson blushes of alternate rage and mortification—and perhaps sudden confusion born of the hose impulsively donned—Barbara faithfully portrayed her mother's description.

"I *do* look like a pirate!" childishly she stamped her foot. Then wheeled round appealing to me "Kevin!"

But I was not to be beguiled:

> "'A primrose by a river's brim
> A yellow primrose was to him,
> *And nothing more*'"—firmly.

"She shan't be called a primrose if it upsets her," teased Larry in his turn. "She's our own little pet hedgehog!"

We all tried to remain serious, and not one of us succeeded . . . the simile was all too apt of Barbara's lapses into prickliness. She stood in the centre of the room, one slender hand on the hip, uncertain whether to cry or to join in the laughter against herself; underlip bitten in; small head thrown defiantly backwards, the swathed yellow silk defining its perfect shapeliness. . . . A primrose—no, not quite—a primrose crouched too closely to the earth. The dance of the golden harebells, if that could exist—or a cowslip swung frailly on its stem.

Suddenly, in startling interpretation of my thoughts, Larry began to whistle Mendelssohn's Spring Song.

"Don't!" cried Barbara passionately . . . she had been teased enough.

But he took no heed of her—nor of us . . . and the mischievous melody persisted—it seemed to encircle her, twine her about and about with its elusive gaiety—darted away only to return again . . . tweaking her spirit in invitation; taunting her pride; mocking her silly efforts to escape from April's own youthfulness.

How he whistled! as he leant nonchalantly against the balustrade, hardly looking in her direction—but wooing her, wooing her all the time in his own fashion. . . . The girl was frightened, put up her hands

to her ears, moved away as though by so doing she could break through the well-nigh tangible besetting of melody. . . . All round her, green tassels a-sway in a flimmer of pale sunshine . . . three sticks crossed—bring a bit of twine—now gather some small dry twigs for the lighting—that's capital! . . . mush of last autumn's leaves underfoot . . . damp moss and earth and sharp sweet smells . . . a wisp of blue smoke. Babs, Babs, forgive me that I did not trust in your coming . . . look, I am here, your mate, young as you and as crazy with the spring . . . dear . . . dearest. . . .

Thus the melody whispered and coaxed—then danced away again in a fury at her lack of response—little chit! little schoolgirl! and she thought she could be a pirate; a dashing dare-devil pirate! What—*she? she? she?* pixie fingers pointing in derision. She a pirate? Why has she knotted a rag of yellow silk round her head? To look like a pirate! ha—ha-ha—ha-ha-ha . . . the notes staggered into irresponsible merriment at the mere idea—trilled up and up with liquid, inhuman laughter. . . .

Bewildered, terrified beyond all control, Barbara suddenly threw herself on her knees in front of her mother, and with head buried in her arms, burst into a storm of sobs.

Larry stopped whistling.

Presently Micky said: "She's crying because she

thinks Nebuchadnezzar'ull die before morning. He *is* looking pretty bad. Babs is such an ass about mice!"

I mentally assigned Micky a high post in the diplomatic service.

"Neb—Oh, Mums, he mustn't die—he shan't die —I couldn't bear it. I'll stop up all night with him. . . ." And I cannot tell in what after form Barbara displayed her gratitude to her small brother.

"Will you indeed? Not being sufficiently over-excited already, I suppose!" Kate Seton's tone was semi-humorous; part-angry—but she could hardly vent her anger on Larry for . . . what had he done? —for whistling a song. So she let her humour triumph, and continued: "You're all of you behaving like bad children who have sat up too late at a party. We'll have a nice quiet round game of cards to settle you down—and then bed for the lot of you!" She drew a pack from the table-drawer—"I found these in the cupboard the other day.

I glanced at them—and broke down helplessly.

"Now it's you, Kevin! I thought at least you. . . . Well, what's the joke, anyhow?"

"Your nice quiet game of cards to settle us down, happens to be—Pit, that's all!" I gasped, as soon as I could exchange laughter for speech. "You've never played Pit? Well, you shall play it now . . . it'll be a revelation to you, Kate. Here, I'll deal!"

"Old Robinson left 'em here, four years ago, as a

sort of farewell present, I believe," Ned explained, referring to a schoolmate who had previously stayed at The Shoe.

Henry Seton peered in at us.

"Come and join, Henry."

Lugubriously he shook his head: "No—my youngest guinea-pig is dying. I intend to sit up with it all night."

"And *I* intend not to be made miserable a second longer by this awful plague of dying pets, engulfing my family's nights. Come and join us, Henry. Be bright. Smile. There are your cards, and Ned will tell you the rules of the game. It's very pleasant, so far."

"The pit is open!" I declaimed maliciously.

And even Kate looked astonished by the horrible clamour which followed my simple announcement.

Making a noise—a causeless, yelping, incessant unmusical noise, was what we all most needed to give vent to the suppressed hysteria which had been accumulating since Larry's arrival. Now, by dint of "Two—two—two" "One—one" "Three—three—three—three" bawled just beyond the utmost limit of our shouting capacities, we relieved ourselves somewhat . . . though if K. B. Seton imagined from the noise that we were the roomful of healthy, happy, rowdy youngsters we seemed to the casual ear, her sense of atmosphere was, as usual, at fault.

The first round continued interminably, with ever more of din. . . . Something was wrong with the

machinery of the game—The winning shout of: "Corner in wheat" or straw—or oats—ought to have been raised long ago. Then we discovered Henry clutching with obstinate pertinacity to his original share of cards—refusing to allow a single one of them to circulate. No wonder, then, that the barter was endless.

Barbara and Ned hurled themselves upon him, expostulating: "But, *Dad*——"

"Henry *dear*——"

"Look—these wheats—you want to get rid of them—you must call 'two—two—two——' "

"No," said Henry gloomily. "I don't want to."

"That closes the argument, I think," and I flung down my cards. "Come on, Larry—I'll see you home to Tremmerrith. I want some fresh air after this." And indeed, our packed, flushed circle of faces, seen round the lamp, might have belonged to intent gamblers in a sub-world of sensational fiction.

As the door closed behind us, we heard Barbara and Henry finally and hysterically and in the face of Mrs. Seton's prohibitions, asserting that they meant to sit up till dawn—and it was already past midnight—with their ailing baby mouse and youngest guinea-pig respectively.

"Mum, it's raining, and I do want to sleep in a bed for once . . ." squealed Micky.

And then no more. . . . The splash of our own feet over a squiggle of track through the dim clover-field.

Larry said, as though continuing a conversation started long ago: "I always knew I'd spoil something good for myself by what I did. Kev, I told Barbara I loved her, and that I wanted her to marry me, today, climbing up the island."

"And you told her that you loved her, and that she could go to Hell, tonight, sitting on the balustrade. . . ."

"And only you picked up the message—as if you were any good!" Larry laughed ruefully, and whistled the opening bars of the Spring Song, then subsided again into his previous dejection. His mad gaiety, which ever since supper had swirled everything and everybody into burlesque, was easily proving its flimsy quality now we were well away from the Setons.

"I say"—he recommenced abruptly—"have you gathered why they've been treating me in this abominable fashion all the week? Babs had it out with me—what is it, Kev?"

"Nothing."

Our faces were invisible to each other, under the mournful starless sky.

"They know—she knows—all about Felicity."

I wondered with what indifference I might have listened to Larry's self-reproach on the score of his past, had the past been "Constance" or "Helen" or "Louise"? any one name more impersonal to me than "Felicity."

That he should speak of her as his discarded mistress—a phase, an incident that he regretted. . . .

"Found dead in a field" . . . sensational enough in the local newspaper—but I remembered that I had done Larry an injury, and so could not kill him. . . .

"We had quite a pleasant little scene," Larry went on. "So frank and natural. Babs began: 'I hate pretending, and I'm not going to pretend any more. You may as well hear right out that I detest and despise you; we've all loathed you from the moment you came into the house, and even before; mother's deadly sorry she ever invited you. We were perfectly happy before you came. But what we know about you makes us sick!' I asked, as politely as the occasion warranted, what they knew about me? . . . and she told me."

"And how did *she* know?"

"Somebody told her, I suppose."

"I suppose you think *I* did."

"Yes. While you were delirious."

A pause; then, "Look here, you mustn't let her know that I've told you that she told me you told her . . . no, don't laugh—I promised I wouldn't, because she doesn't know that you know."

"When did you guess that I had let it out?"

"From the minute I set foot in the place—and she treated me like a leper——" he broke off—"oh, but I do love her so . . ." he whispered half under his breath.

"I was not delirious," I said slowly and deliberately.

And Larry replied, "I knew that, too."

[11]

We had passed his house by now, and were trudging steadily onwards between the steep hedges of the lane. . . . Somewhere was a china-shop and a bull banging about in it, and still the shatter and crash of broken crockery, more broken crockery, crockery which had stood intact upon the shelves for years. . . . "I knew that, too," said Larry. "Surprised? Why? Of course you queered my pitch; hating each other as we do, it would hardly be human if you hadn't."

I was guilty of the ingenious query, "Do you hate me, too?"

"Well, what did you suppose was the reflex action of your hatred upon me?"

"I didn't think of you."

"Oh, surely—quite a lot!" he mocked. "I wonder you ever thought of anything else. I tell you, Kev, it got to be an obsession of mine—your dogging, ferocious, persistent jealousy. . . . Till I discovered that it was—fun, making things worse for you—butting in where you didn't want me, and so on. You imagined that it was my blatant, unconscious idiocy, didn't you? I took a sort of cussed delight in seeing you suffer . . . from this same idiocy. You—twanged a nerve in me. . . ."

"Banjo solos for two," I remarked grimly.

"You should have left me alone—and then I'd have left you alone," he burst out, as though from a

long pent-up sense of injury. "You began it . . . whatever I achieved, you resented it; whoever liked me, you grudged it. Your jealousy clogged up the very pores of the world."

I was shaken with a fit of mad, ironic laughter —Larry's point of view—Larry's point of view.

"I'd have killed you, if I hadn't found relief in just—annoying you," he finished his confession, and jerked back his head with an air of defiance.

"Dear little lad, aren't you?"

"I'm not that sort of beast with any one else. Kev, I'm not. If I were, I'd shoot myself as unfit for society. It's only just where you're concerned. That one nerve—When I see the sullen slouch of your body . . . hating me with every line of it —then I turn vicious. You're always *there*. . . . Why can't you stop hating me? You're responsible for—for the banjo solo, as you call it. That two men shouldn't find it decently possible to keep out of each other's way——"

"My dear old Larry, if I set up house in Kamschatka and you in Southern Tibet, we should be irresistibly drawn and drawn . . . until we jostled again in Porthgollan."

"But *what is it*, Kev?"

"The construction of things. There isn't room for both of us."

He stopped dead, facing me, "I say—that's rather awful."

His comment, solemn and stricken—and somehow

irresistibly chubby, on a state of psychology with which I was familiar even unto nausea, twitched afresh at my risible sense—it was in an exposed condition of late. Besides, my particular banjo solo was in abeyance for the moment; it never twanged when Larry was dejected or unsuccessful.

"Rather awful," I repeated. "Perhaps we had better try the Tibet-Kamschatka experiment after these confidences. It's a dark night . . . but, you know, we shall find it difficult to look each other in the face, over a narrow but sunshiny breakfast-table."

"Yes, awkward they should have placed us so exactly opposite. The typical Seton touch about the situation, though. So it's good-bye for ever, Kev, old pal! Funny that I should feel it a wrench. . . . Kev, I believe I'm confoundedly fond of you."

"You are," I tranquilly assured him. "As I of you. That's the whole point of the joke. Well, well . . . the best of friends must part——"

"But how small the world is!" Larry capped my platitude.

"It is—with you in it!"

"You needn't give way to your sardonic humour just at the last."

"On the contrary, I've half a mind to indulge myself and be bad for you, by confessing all that I've most admired in you, during our seventeen years of acquaintance."

"Strike a bargain. If you do, I will."

We spent the next ten minutes vying mutual compliments and generosity. And then after all I vetoed the South Tibet expedition.

"Oh, curse your vacillating temperament! Is it likely that I'd have revealed to you my admiration for your manly qualities, if I supposed I was ever going to see you again?"

"You can set off, against that, my enthusiasm for your more scintillating fascination. Oh, Lord, I wish we hadn't! it's a perilous pastime—you'll be unbearable henceforward."

"Barbara says I'm unbearable already."

"Oh, but then Barbara is quite, quite sure of what is absolutely and definitely wrong. It's the blessed creed of seventeen."

"Especially blessed—for me. She's the type who'll go on being seventeen and unforgiving. According to Barbara, there's nothing to be said for me . . . a libertine, a wastrel, the sort of a man a girl hears about, but hopes she'll never meet—ah God, Kevin! *is* there nothing to be said for a mere fool?"

Seventeen must have punished him cruelly for—forty-two. I had never before heard that inflection of dragging wretchedness in any man's tone. . . . Suddenly my focus shifted, swung round as though on a pivot; and instead of my bitter resistance to the Larry-dynasty robbing me of my due, it appeared that Larry had been robbed, and that Felicity and I were separately guilty of it.

"There *are* one or two things to be said for a fool

and Barbara requires to hear them—crude little ignoramus! Leave her to me, Larry—it'll be all right."

"But you care for her yourself."

"That's beside the point. . . ." But it was obviously time I adjusted my conception of Larry as an unconscious happy-go-lucky. And here we stood outside The Shoe once more, having tramped a complete circle.

"Hullo! I thought you were going to see me home."

"Well, I'm not—once is enough, in one evening. Hush—Micky may be awake." The shadowy outline of a camp-bed on the grass, indicated that the youngest Seton, in spite of his pleadings, was still forbidden the luxury of indoor slumber.

After Larry had swung off across the same clover-field that had squelched to our footsteps a couple of hours ago, I turned my back on the cottage, and took the sea-road, and walked, and walked in a drizzle of rain until the grey sky tore into streaks of amber.

"Sh—I say—The mouse is dead."

Ned lounged, an outpost, a few paces up the lane, to warn all comers.

"Babs is no end cut up. And Mater's as snappy—says she had hardly any sleep. So don't put your foot in it."

At the garden gate, K. B. Seton furtively waylaid me.

"That nasty little brute died at 2.15 A.M. I was startled out of my best sleep by Barbara hurling herself, sobbing, into my bed; she had been lying on the kitchen dresser till then, so as to be sure to keep awake and feed it every two hours."

"That's the Maternal Instinct coming out in her, Kate."

"I'd rather it didn't, then, at unholy hours of the night. You'd better not mention his name."

I made a slip: "Larry's?"

"Nebuchadnezzar, of course—don't be a fool. I can't stand it in my present state of temper."

Snubbed, I walked on; on the very threshold of the kitchen I was confronted by a portentous Micky.

"Neb's dead," in whispered warning. "Sh—Babs is inside. Behave as though nothing had happened."

I reassured him as to my capacity for behaving as though nothing had happened, and greeted Barbara with a boisterous: "Hullo! I'm starving for my breakfast—Been for a long walk already."

"I thought you would have overslept yourself, we were so late last night. . . ." She made gallant effort to respond. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, and her lips wan . . . poor baby, weeping half the night for Larry, and having to pretend it was for a field-mouse.

Larry appeared late; and jauntily proposed his departure the next day. Nobody commented. I saw Barbara's look flit searchingly from his face to mine.

. . . She did not at all know whether or not Larry had kept his word and not told me, on our homeward ramble the night before, that she had told him what I must not know I had told.

Nebuchadnezzar, animals in general, mice in particular, death and funerals, were topics strenuously tabooed by each and all of us, during breakfast. Then Henry appeared from the garden, with, as usual, a completely devastating announcement:

"The youngest guinea-pig is dead. I found him lying on the floor of the hutch, his little nose blue and his little feet curled up like this . . ." he tried to illustrate.

Barbara broke down, and fled, choking, from the table. And Mrs. Seton said: "You're not supple enough for trapeze acrobatics, Henry. Here's your pilchard. Eat it and keep quiet."

She confided in me afterwards, sighing for Henry's great foolishness, that the nose and feet as described were exactly Nebuchadnezzar's attitude in death.

[12]

Twenty-four uncomfortable hours later, I found Barbara prone on her face among the spongy cushions of the sea-thrift, fading now to a withered brown.

I thought of the china-shop . . . and took the bull by the horns.

"You'll miss saying good-bye to Larry, if you lie out here."

"Don't care!" in stifled defiance.

"When he came, you began supper without him. Your welcome was on the negative side. You hustled Ned into that disgraceful trick of driving the cart through Lobb Lane—Yes, you did—I guessed it from the start," I recapitulated, sitting down beside her, my back against a solid chunk of granite. "You were ruder to Larry than I've ever seen anybody to anybody; you set yourself up as a judge of his private affairs; and finally you hide away from his departure to avoid the necessity of holding his hand for a second or two . . . as though he were loathsome because he loves you——"

"Don't! How dare you, Kevin! I mean, I don't want him to . . . *that* sort of man!"

"Babs, infant of all the world, nearly every sort of man is *that* sort of man. I am; Micky will be, one day—and as for your Prince Charming . . . do you really dare to suppose, when you meet, that there will be nothing to forgive in him? Pah—it'll be a hard, dry, blue-chilly thing, your perfect love-affair—I don't envy the man."

"You're too abominably rude for words," she stormed at me. Then subsided to a whisper of amazed contrition: "Kev, Kev, how can you stick up for him . . . when it's your own mother?"

"And how do you know that?"

"You——" she stopped. Eyed me doubtfully.

I suppose my expression gave her no help, for she cried: "Then he *didn't*——" and stopped again, wholly at a loss.

"Yes, he did."

"Then he's got no sense of honour, not one scrap."

"And what made you give me away to him?" in my most wooden voice.

Her face flamed and flamed. . . . "Oh, I'm sorry"—piteously.

But I could not let her off yet: "It's the first bit of china wantonly broken, that counts. The rest kind of slips off the shelf by itself."

And Barbara might so easily have reminded me here that it was I, not she, responsible for the original damage. I risked that. . . . Her sweet mouth set itself firmly, and she uttered not a word.

"Larry didn't tell me, Babs. At least, he did, but only because he guessed from the beginning that I was—consciously unconscious."

I was gazing rather intently, while I spoke, at a steamer on the horizon. Presently I heard little plaintive sounds beside me, like a child crying its heart out for very weariness.

"Don't be a goose, Barbara," sternly.

"Oh, I don't want, I don't *want* people to be so c-c-clever. . . . Is it always going to be all tangled up like this?" suddenly forlorn and terrified in a universe where her cocksure young poise and swinging honesty were inadequate equipment.

"You see, Barbara," I argued slowly, "your whole

attitude towards Larry was just a piece of colossal conceit. From what standpoint of wisdom and experience have you judged and condemned him? You haven't even begun your study of such trifling matters as human nature, temptation, sex, and so on. There's not one single element in Larry's past history where you can understand or criticize or—presume to be shocked. I dare say a lot of silly little schoolgirls have sat on their desks and sucked toffee and put together the sort of world which suited their stage of crude ignorance—but you can't expect grown persons to inhabit that world . . . not till you enlarge its boundaries a bit."

Barbara rose and would have walked away, but I caught hold of her wrist:

"You may as well sit down—I haven't finished yet."

"You're—preaching!"

"I'm not. I'm being too rude to preach. I'm being almost as rude as you've been—By God, Barbara, I've grown hot all over with shame, on occasions, at the way you've treated Larry; hot to think that he should have to make allowances for you. Your guest. Had you no sort of code of hospitality? Whatever he was, whatever he is, he arrived here, invited by you—well, your mother—same thing. By all the existing laws, he was entitled to common civility, if not to a warm welcome. And—no, I won't say you behaved like a savage, because savages are notoriously hospitable. You just—blundered!

If he *was* a libertine, he was your guest. If he was a criminal, he was your guest. And if he was a leper, he was still . . . your guest!"

That my peroration had shaped itself into a slightly mutilated version of the big dramatic scene from "Lady Windermere's Fan," hardly mattered; since my sole aim was to produce an effect upon Barbara. Though I marvelled again that throughout such a tirade, the girl should make not one attempt to shield herself by referring to my own confessed betrayal of Larry Munro. I was prepared to reply, with what cold detachment I could muster, that I was well aware my act had placed me outside the pale of decency and honour, and was therefore beyond discussion; *her* blunderings, however, were as yet retrievable.

But—could it be indeed that Barbara was learning? She was white as foam; her eyes full of a hurt perplexity . . . and she only said: "Yes—but—Kevin, *isn't* there right and wrong? And isn't it up to a girl to show from the start that it matters? . . . Or people could do anything!"

"And the greatest of these is tolerance" I murmured, plucking up the dry thrift blossoms.

"Charity," she corrected.

"D'you suppose Larry has any use for your 'Charity'? The 'good angel who stoops to forgive' sort of mush? *Charity!*—it's your fellowship that's needed—good fellowship that understands, and might easily have done likewise, and frankly owns it. If

all you can do is to forgive, Babs—then Larry had better pass on."

Again I waited, apparently engrossed in the horizon line . . . till a cold, small hand curled itself into my palm.

"Will you tell me all about it, Kevin? About . . . your . . . mother—and him? Tell me properly, I mean—and I'll try to be a good fellow."

Well—Heaven knows it was not easy . . . but I spun a fairy-tale out of the pale-haired princess who lost her man three days before she was to wed him; and ten years later magically found him again, even younger and more gallant and debonair than before.

And the little goose-girl, sitting in a heap among the sea-thrift, right in the middle of her own fairy tale, listened with lips parted, and soft chin tilted upwards in breathless attention. . . .

The steadfast friendship of Prue and Felicity drew from her a quick: "Oh, but how could they share him?"

"He was dead, Barbara. It's not hard to share a dead man."

"*I* won't . . ." with a decisive little nod. "I mean, I wouldn't, if—and they shared Larry as well as his father."

"Prue doesn't know that she has ever shared her son with Felicity."

"Then she *ought* to know!" the old Barbara flared into being. "Somebody ought to tell her."

"To make her unhappy? And to spoil a thing beautifully and rarely created . . . with one thrust of fact? Child, there are some lies and some secrets that are wiser than truth, and sometimes truer."

Barbara sighed: "You say so—but I can't quite believe it," she murmured.

And she would never quite believe it, essentially a Seton in her sturdy decision not to acquiesce and be tangled into any phantasmal and intricate conspiracy towards which I, fatalist, might beckon her.

"Go on!" she commanded.

The later development of my tale was harder to translate into simple Barbara-language; but I did my best with Larry's reactionary longing for a girl, young and impulsive; young enough to pick up sticks with him and to help him light a gipsy fire . . . here a puff of blue wood-smoke blew across the story, just in time to dim Barbara's vision of Larry's behaviour to Felicity, which was not pretty and therefor hard to englamour. Indeed, I had for a long time groped in vain after the nursery-wall-paper-mood of my arrival in Cornwall. Perhaps because I still felt it myself so vividly, did I cause her to realize the pathos of that drawing-room, with the absurd little gold chairs standing empty; Felicity, in sprigged muslin and corals, being vaguely charming and hospitable to Miss Beech and Miss Hilda Beech. . . .

No need for emphasis here—Barbara's neck and cheeks were for an instant a glow of crimson. . . .

Of the subsequent incident with the photograph, I mentioned nothing; there are some lies and some secrets that are wiser than truth. . . .

"And Larry came to The Shoe and found Barbara."

She whispered: "I was horrid to him."

And laconically I said, "Never mind; the cart was to call for him at a quarter to ten; he's gone by now —aren't you glad?"

"Aren't you glad" was sarcasm wasted—Barbara was already on her feet . . . flying up the white road between the sand-hummocks. I reckoned she would be at Tremmerrith before ten o'clock—and the cart was not due to call for Larry until a quarter to eleven.

[13]

I am well aware that my traditionally noble action in bringing about the engagement of my rival to the girl I loved myself, ought to have lifted me to the traditional mood of pale exultation; a mood half-humorous, semi-wistful, demi-tender: "I'm so glad, Larry, old man, about you and Barbara—why yes, *really* glad—could you doubt it?" and then the traditional exit into the night or on to the scaffold—the example of Sydney Carton is responsible for much.

But not, thank goodness, for me, at this juncture.

The sight of the happy, handsome pair bounding, light of heel, through a solar system which obviously

belonged to them and where the rest of us were just admitted on sufferance, reduced me to a state of outward ill-humour and mental savagery that did me credit as a human being and not a god of abstract benevolence.

Any impulse to friendliness that I may have felt for Larry dejected, unsuccessful with Barbara, and solitary in battle against the united Setons, was instantaneously metamorphosed into the old sick hatred —a degree worse than ever—for the new Larry. His quick perceptions reacted instantly to my dogging envy and begrudgement. And now, in the after-light of our discussion, I beheld clearly how the young ruffian took conscious pleasure in provoking my self-control to the utmost, by subtle parade of his happiness; why, his every poise, his every gesture and remark and inflexion, wryly drew together the palate of my soul . . . and he knew it! I marvelled that I could ever have been dense enough to imagine him oblivious. I was something less than man just now—mere incarnate resentment of his very right to existence. Was my presence in any wise rasping his smooth days? I was afraid not—they were beyond my jealous reach. And: "You did it yourself! Yah! yah! yah! You did it yourself"—the gnome-chorus again, jeering and pointing. . . . Oh, I had done it myself, beyond a doubt; but not for Larry's sake nor for Barbara's; conscience demanded to be squared over that delirium business, that was all.

My fool's tongue had committed an error which required for only adequate atonement my scene with Barbara on the morning of Larry's proposed departure. . . . "You did it yourself—yah! yah! yah! did it yourself."

I arranged with what precipitation self-respect permitted, to be recalled to London. Kate spoke no word to detain me—it was blatantly unnecessary that both Larry and I should stop on at The Shoe; but she seemed grieved, nevertheless, at destiny's choice; she never cared violently for Larry, and all his charm could not win her; though she was relieved, I think, that the "fast young man" should have meant so honourably by Barbara; and glad, it is certain, that Barbara was to be married. What she had feared, on my disclosure, was a summer flirtation—exit Larry whistling—daughter, broken-hearted, and with consumption, left permanently under her mother's roof.

[14]

"Off today, Kev? I hadn't realized it. I shall miss you."

"I don't doubt it. It's not so much fun to exhibit when I'm not there."

"Excuse me—when you're not there I've no desires that way. A certain aspect of your personality evokes—exhibition. It annoys you to see me happy, doesn't it, Kev?"

"I'd rather see you . . . *dead* than happy!" And till I had actually burst out with this, I had not known it to be true. I knew now. . . .

"Do you mean that?" Larry was momentarily sobered.

"Yes—I'm afraid I do." I sat down on a boulder of rock and bowed my head on to my hands. . . . Presently I looked up again at Larry; his eyes were troubled.

"Well?"

"You'll go mad one day about me," he foretold abruptly.

"I suppose so. Perhaps I'm mad already. It isn't only you, it's your father and your son . . . the dynasty . . . I may still have to see your son's son. There are so many of you—Larry Munro. I'm shut up in the world with you and can't get away. . . ."

"Feeling like this, why did you put things right for me with Barbara?"

"It happens I had to put things right for me with myself; d'you imagine you had anything to do with it?" I growled.

"I suppose I ought to return the act of sacrifice by offering to yield her up to you."

"Only that she's a sentient thing of pulse and heart-beatings—not to be handed about between us like a bale of goods."

Larry's smile was baffling: "Why not wreck my

cause by telling her about . . . the kids? Another spasm of delirium——"

"Thank you." The burning shame stung my forehead. After a pause, I forced myself to discussion of the incident which had lain between us all this while more or less inert; since Larry wanted to punish me for it by open speech, he might as well do so before I left Cornwall:

"It's rather odd, though, isn't it, that Barbara should have relied so absolutely on the truth of what was to her a phrase let fall in delirium?"

"Oh well, you repeated it and amplified it and insisted upon it so often in your second bout of raving——"

"My—second—bout. What do you mean? Larry, what do you mean?"

He appeared genuinely astonished. "Then you were really unconscious . . . after the first give-away? I'm sorry, Kev; I thought you knew what you were about all the time."

The inside of my head was grinding red-hot machinery . . . I wrenched it to coherent recollection . . . "Larry's mistress is my mother"—and before that and after that, it had been endless passages between high black walls, sand under the running foot, Larry behind me with a grotesque bladder swung aloft. So after that one lucid interval, I had unconsciously betrayed again and again the secret I had so longed to betray unconsciously. My remorse

was for nothing—and my atonement. I need not have influenced Barbara into making Larry happy—I was not guilty of treachery; since the main treachery had occurred when will and reason were wholly irresponsible. I need not—I need not——

"What's the joke, Kev?"

. . . I discovered that I was laughing. And stopped. And silently contemplated Larry, whom I had made happy. . . .

"Look here, old man, if you *want* to pitch me over the cliff, do it now and quickly. You may not get another chance, as you're leaving today. It would be awkward if the desire came over you as strongly in —the Cromwell Road, let's say, where there are no facilities."

"Only," he went on, "stop *looking* murder at me . . . it's uncomfortable."

I got up and walked away inland, Larry beside me, chatting pleasantly:

"Afraid of the temptation? But what a successful ghost I'd be, howling and moaning round your pillow after you had married Babs. . . .

> " 'Yes, lad, I lie easy,
> I lie as men would choose;
> I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
> Never ask me whose!' . . .

Or—no—what was the special stunt of Hamlet's father? I'd appear to young Larrikin and exhort him to make a painful end of you, with Felicity in

the part of Ophelia. . . . There's something wrong with that, somewhere."

"There is indeed. Have you thought yet of telling Felicity about your engagement?"

"Won't you, Kev?"

"Do your own filthy work."

"But I'm so clumsy and you're so tactful," he wheedled.

I halted, smitten by a sudden idea: "You've let Prue know?"

"The mater? Yes. Of course. Heard from her yesterday. She's awfully pleased. Barbara's just the sort of girl——"

"*She'll* tell Felicity, so you needn't worry any further. She'll expect her to take a maternal interest in the engagement."

"M'yes. Yes, I suppose so." Larry's outrageous buoyancy was checked for the moment. "But Fel will go down to Thyme Croft, where the kiddies are, before I come back and bring Babs back to the mater."

"Funny that I shouldn't have jumbled in the kiddies when I fell a-raving again."

"Oh, you did. But you fortunately omitted to mention where they connected with the main line. Babs must have supposed 'Larrikin' was me. She asked if I'd ever known—or loved, in brackets—any one called 'Yo'? So I used up the cue for the incident of the flapper in the Café Royal—you

remember? Her name happened to be Peggy, but still——"

I considered this quite an unnecessary complication, though trivial. And told him so.

"Oh, where's the harm? Babs wanted a confession, so I gave her one ready-made—bless her! I didn't quite know how to account for Yo, otherwise."

"She's hardly accounted for now, in the fullest sense of the word. Nor Larrikin either."

He sighed impatiently, "My good man, I owe you more than my life, but I consider you both a bore and a prig. They've got a mother who adores them; and who has great wealth——"

"Thanks to my father." I could not resist the return thrust for his "bore and a prig." If I had murdered him, as a few seconds ago was highly possible, he might have called me any name under the sun—but not a bore, certainly. This was all the thanks my forbearance received. I complained of it. . . . He interrupted me, "I'm enjoying our chat tremendously, Kev, but you'll be late for your train. As the darling of all the Setons, they'll want to make you the object of lengthy good-byes."

I could have dispensed with Barbara's embrace . . . but she meant well. Perhaps, after all, Larry's deliberately cool and ungrateful attitude best suited the demands of my temper, for the moment. K. B. Seton sorrowed visibly at my departure; and dropped her last imperceptible hint by remarking, with a warm squeeze of my hands, and a reproachful look at Larry

and Barbara, that certain matters had not turned out in the least as she had originally hoped.

Micky drove me into St. Catts. He had claimed the right to do so. Among the gifts I seemed accidentally to have won for myself while occupied in a totally different direction, was Micky's passionate loyalty and devotion. Which rendered me proud and yet sorrowful; undeserving as a Stuart might have felt towards an adherent of his lost cause. He was distinctly public-school boy during the drive, and as we paced the platform; remaining so until I leant from the window of my compartment to thank him politely for his safe conduct. Then he said, with an effort:

"Good-bye. Rotten it was Larry . . . and not you."

. . . But I was being carried away from Larry, space between us widening and stretching with every forward leap of the express. Larry was left behind me in Cornwall—Cornwall—had I indeed once thought of that packed darkness of happenings, as an escape from reality into enchantment?

Cornwall meant Larry's letter; and the arrival of Larry; and a whole family speaking, thinking, hating, loving, obsessed by Larry; and Larry's white sweater sharp-cut against the sombre rock archway; and Larry's insolent, oblique eyes as he said, "Why not study the art of welcoming a guest?"; and Larry whistling the Spring Song to Barbara; and Larry walking beside me across dark, warm clover-fields, "I knew that, too" . . . and Larry, the triumphant

wooer, standing in a group of Setons at the gate of The Shoe, watching me drive off. . . .

Devon now, and everywhere clumps of foxgloves empurpling the woods with their delicate spotted trumpets. But further on these would give way to rows of bunched-up little houses new and hectic, or else resigned to their sallow hue, heralding London's approach—my final escape from reality into enchantment. . . . By then I would have left Larry far behind me in Cornwall. Restlessly I shifted my seat from one window-corner to another—the carriage was empty. But on this side were fresh battalions of foxgloves, vivid where the afternoon sun slanted dustily between the larch-stems. . . . How I loathed the west-country for its easy loveliness; longed for the dingy litle houses. . . .

"And you say she's a nice girl, Kevin?"

"Oh, thoroughly nice."

Prue beamed at me affectionately; "I hoped you would say so. Larry, of course, has written me a pack of rubbish about her, but as you're not in love with her, I can take your word for it better than his."

Such cheap irony as this could not be accorded even a sardonic grin. . . . I remained mentally rigid.

"Such a pity she has a writer mother. . . ."

Felicity, sitting beside us under the sycamore in Prue's garden, interrupted fretfully:

"Larry can always retaliate with an actor father!"

"Oh, my dear, he made a dreadful husband! never at home, and not caring a bit when I had chilblains, though he was always ready enough to have his chest rubbed and poulticed."

It was not often that Prue allowed herself to be betrayed into comment on the first Larry Munro; but when she did dip into the store of memories so sacredly enwinded, it was usually to bring forth an incident of so astoundingly practical a nature as compelled marvel that musing on them should light her droll little face to such beauty.

"Oh, but next time you have them, remind me to hunt up that perfectly wonderful recipe for chilblains that Lady Barclay gave me last winter; only I never get them." And indeed it was as incredible to imagine Felicity with chilblains in winter, as Prue without them! "Or was it that mushroom *entreé* I asked for at her dinner-party?" Felicity went on. Then, lazily vindictive, "Larry will be exactly the same."

"We've brought him up better than that." Prue's smile deliberately included her friend in the "we" . . . and Felicity twitched her chair deeper into the shade. She suffered from the other woman's assumption that as a matter of course the joyous details of Larry's engagement concerned them both, and in equal measure, maternally; suffered, and could utter no sound. . . . I said quickly:

"If you could see K. B. Seton sternly yet amiably bargaining for a pair of rabbits, and always getting

the best of it, you'd never dream she was a novelist," contesting Prue's contempt for the writer-mother.

"Good thing too. Then she'll have taught the child to feed a man sensibly, and not on cocoa and buns and tinned fish—I know what girls are nowadays! I expect, though, there'll be fuss and tears bye-and-bye at parting with her only daughter—and not yet eighteen! she probably hoped to keep her at home a good six years still."

I grinned into my pipe, well pleased with a private vision of Kate's dismay at any prospect of retaining her daughter at home for another six months.

"Oh, Mrs. Seton's not sentimental."

"Neither am I sentimental," said Prue superfluously; "but it's a bit of a twist to give up that young scapegrace of mine, even to such a nice, suitable girl; though, mind, I wouldn't let anybody know it but you two; I've no patience with the sort of mother-in-law who makes a song-and-dance and to-do all about a widow bereft of her only joy, till the poor girl feels worse than a burglar. Why, I've invited Barbara to stay with me for a fortnight in September when they come back to Town; and I'm looking forward to it immensely. I dare say there are lots of little household things I can teach her, without being too brusque about it. When it comes to facts, a writer *is* only a writer, rabbits or not!"

Felicity rose, pushed back a weary hand through the soft amber flop of her hair, "That sounds immoral,

Prue darling—no, I don't know why, I suppose it's the rabbits . . . rabbits *do* always convey that idea, don't they? . . . I'll send you over that recipe for the mushroom *entreé* at once—didn't you say you wanted it in time for a dinner-party? I must go now; I'm expecting some people to tea."

"Anybody I know? What a lot you entertain lately, Felicity! it must come so expensive when you reckon it up."

"I never do."

"And you get nothing for it in the end."

"You get nothing for anything in the end, do you, Kevin? Thank God, I have a son who is a cynic and an unbeliever."

She so rarely called me her son, or even casually referred to our relationship, that my heart throbbed quickly.

"Sorry to hear it. If Kevin is a misanthropist, it's because he hasn't enough work to do."

" 'Misanthropist' is very pleasant," I murmured. "And I've had two briefs since Christmas."

"Oh—is that a lot?"

But Prue's delicate snort signified that she was exactly aware how many briefs per week were the due of a successful barrister, and that she regarded Felicity's question as feeble-minded.

" *Who* did you say you were expecting?"

"People . . . I don't know their names. A sister and two brothers and another girl—They all

share a studio and give dancing-lessons. . . . No, let me see—I think it was a brother and two sisters and another man. They seem quite charming anyhow, and asked if they might call. They wear jumpers with that curious draught-board effect. . . . Are you coming in too, Kevin? Do!"

"Think I ought to be exposed to the dangers of a draught-board effect?" I hoisted myself with apparent unwillingness out of the deck chair . . . but it really did seem, since my return from Porthgollan, as though Felicity were slightly less indifferent to my presence than of yore.

"Come in again soon, Kevin; I want to hear all that you can tell me about my future daughter-in-law. . . ." and suddenly, Prue added, in what was for her a tone of sheer passion: "Larry *must* be made happy."

Felicity, trailing downwards from a slender height to receive, as wontedly, an affectionate peck on the cheek, drew back . . . her look at me was appealing, and at the same time dimly appreciative of humour in the situation.

But she asked me no questions about Barbara, then or ever.

Felicity's life, as it appeared to me during the next two or three months, continued to be a scattered and perplexing pageant of charming young people whose names she did not know. . . . Unable to find youth within her, she was clutching feverishly at youth outside—as though a sick soul could better

its condition by picking primroses—holding it for an instant—letting it go, perhaps in realization of the futility of such contact . . . again in panic at her slackened grasp, laying hold of another fleeting figure in the dance—the same?—different?—what matter? They were all alike. . . . "Was it you last time? Oh dear, I thought—but never mind, do come in . . . this is such good fun!"

The drawing-room had altered its character; the little gold chairs were no longer empty, as in Felicity's transition stage from entertaining her guests, to "ragging" with them. But that subtle quality of stateliness and wit and courtesy blended; the reposeful feeling of duration and leisure, of one generation assembled and in harmony, were all so much of the past as to be less than the phantoms I had thought them when the gold chairs were vacant. Felicity's house reminded me now of a hostelry where a crowd of ill-mannered jesters tumbled their hectic exits and entrances at all hours in the twenty-four; callously unaware of their hostess save in spurts of fascinated attention. Indeed, it would have been strange if they, with their sharp, high-coloured edges, had fully understood her pearliness, her misty brilliance, the haunted sub-cry in her talk, as of a bell incessantly pealing, pealing, fathoms under ocean. Nor could they quite grasp what she wanted of them; nor why she invited them so profusely, and muddled the dates and times, and blurred her appointments, and begged them to bring their friends, and let them all slip for-

gotten in a fresh elusive quest after some fresh personality with fresh aims and excitements; and left that phase unfinished, returning to seek what she had recently lost . . . and so lost the new victim and the old alike . . . replaced them threefold, plagued and fearful of missing one atom of the unessential, in her being's vague quest for essential rest and deep content; all the while collecting more and more and ever more human turmoil around her—let's all be young together!

Oh, my dear, why not get old and be still adorable? don't struggle like this. While you play rough-and-tumble with these noisy babes you have gathered round you, Prue, next door, is already busy with sensible socks for her grandchildren . . . it is her way of dreaming. . . .

But Felicity faintly ridiculous, was to me always the Felicity most to be loved. . . .

[15]

While still at Porthgollan, Larry received orders from his firm to go to Scotland for three or four months, to overlook some machinery in the process of erection. He could not afford, even for love's sake, to neglect his career; his financial condition was far inferior to mine, who had inherited a tolerably comfortable income from my father Gilbert Somers. So, grumbling, he went.

When he returned to London, in September, Felicity was away at Thyme Croft; and Barbara had

just arrived on her fortnight's visit to his mother.

"Larry and Barbara are in the garden," whispered Wentworth, when I called one evening—why I cannot say.

"Remarkable!" I retorted irritably—but I might have known the little man would treat the affair as a Royal Betrothal. "Hullo, Prue dear, how's the daughter-in-law shaping?"

Barbara, it seems, had found favour; I learnt that she was a well-mannered, healthy, unaffected girl; high spirited, of course—one expected that, but with no morbid, die-away rubbish about her; she showed a pretty deference towards Wentworth, and was willing to learn whatsoever Prue had to teach her: "Look at this patch," displaying a pair of worn grey pants to my shocked gaze; "I showed her how to put it on this morning, and she's done it very nicely indeed."

"My dear Prue, do you really think that you ought —that she ought—I mean . . . do you consider it's quite—after all, she's only eighteen."

"Don't be absurd, Kevin!" Prue's cheeks were like two bright red apples—"Of *course* these are Wentworth's . . . do you suppose for a moment I would let her learn on Larry's?"

I was informed that the wedding was settled for the early spring—how appropriate to Barbara!—and that Larry had wonderfully improved and settled down since his engagement: "Would you like me to call them in?"

"God forbid! The spectacle would bore me to tears. Any message for Felicity? I'm running down there for the week-end."

"She's staying a long time at that cottage of hers; is she still alone there?"

"Not she; people all the time."

Prue's expression showed her both offended and worried, as she always was at any mention of the retreat to which she was never invited.

"Wentworth, that child has thin stockings on, I noticed them at supper; and these September nights are chilly. Call her in."

They were duly called in.

The demure and rapt demeanour of Babs and Larry nowadays, denied possibility that they had ever quarrelled more ferociously than the proverbial Kilkenny cats. Nowadays, they were as futile and as lacking in personality as any other idiots in their condition. . . . I inquired tenderly after Micky, and departed.

Barbara's fortnight with Prue lengthened to a month and to six weeks—Kate was obviously in no hurry to call her home; and as long, Felicity's exile lasted. I was frequently at Thyme Croft; the third of the dynasty welcomed me with joyous shouts. . . . In whimsical contradiction to the laws of Wicked Step-brother, which demanded that I should at least smother him with pillows, Larrikin and I were quite good pals; he was a pleasant small boy, thin, with a

long upper lip and tiny pointed ears, resembling more closely Larry Munro his grandfather than Larry Munro his father; his eyes, of course, were hazel-green, roguishly inset; and his ways were the well-known ways of all the Larrys.

"Larrikin, bring me that green vase." Felicity stood at the French window, her arms full of garden flowers, her gaze adoring this son of hers. . . .

Larrikin, aged five, conveyed by his expression that he had not quite caught the purport of his mother's request, but that it was probably of no importance.

"The green vase, darling."

Larrikin suddenly had never heard of a green vase. His obstinate shoulders curved yet more obstinately over the combined train-boat-motor in which I worked my way as stoker-mate-and-under-chauffeur.

"Larry dear, I spoke to you. No, don't get it, Kevin; he must use his intelligence." Felicity decided, once a fortnight or thereabouts, that she would unexpectedly try stern systems of education on the children.

"Now, Larry, bring me the green vase; it's on the mantelpiece."

Sighing wearily, he fetched the waste-paper basket and tendered it to her upside down.

"No—not that—don't be foolish. You know what green is? The grass is green. . . ."

Yes, he knew that.

"And you know what a vase is? One puts flowers

in a vase, and water, so that they don't die."

A vivid intelligence dawned in the uplifted eyes—obviously Larry knew what a vase was.

"Then"—Felicity enunciated slowly—"bring—me—the—green—vase."

Larrikin brought her a black velvet cat belonging to Yo.

The lesson went on. I sprawled in the middle of overturned table, umbrella-masts, and string-work, and thoroughly enjoyed myself. Gradually the entire contents of the room were piled up round Felicity . . . till, by a process of elimination, nothing was left for transport save the green vase. Then Larrikin brought her the green vase, and she said to me—or to God—one could never quite tell—that it just proved one must always work on a child's intelligence.

But Larry the third reminded me poignantly of Larry the second during this scene. . . . No wickeder or more exasperating little scamp ever toddled this earth—save one.

Yolande was a different type altogether; a throwback to some forgotten ancestor. You described her best by the word "farouche." Her short mop of yellow hair fell heavily to her eyebrows, even sometimes obscuring her eyes; it was enormously thick and strong, like a young lion's mane. Her mouth was sullen, and for the most part mute. Yet all at once, the child could cast off her enmuffling silences, and be fascinating, irresistible even . . .

occasionally she would reward me with such a mood, when I told her jungle and desert stories—her favourite variety. But the beast had always to triumph over the traveller and explorer, to suit Yo; not because he was a bad man and deserved to be eaten—I would not have dared insert such boresome morality—but because Yo frankly preferred four feet to two. Insensibly we fell into the habit of acting these stories as they were being told. . . . Yo displayed a talent for prowling and ramping that was positively uncanny. Though silent and heavy-lidded, she did not in the least belong to that variety of demure little bookworm with gentle ways, beloved of Victorian writers of children's fiction; she abhorred reading, and her self-invented games were all boisterous and even thrilling. I had an easier time as a slave in Larrikin's galley, than as the human hero in a tiger-hunt stage-managed by Yo. With Felicity she was haughtily aloof; nor could I discover then if this attitude concealed love unrequited, or not.

Felicity was—I must say it—an absolute ass in her behaviour with Yo; she used to quarrel with this fierce little atom as though it were an adult and a contemporary. I remember an occasion when accidentally she ate off Yolande's own special pictured plate, and Yo, a natural baby for once, lifted up her voice and protested, stretched out her hand and snatched; . . . Felicity, incomprehensible as it may seem, was genuinely—offended: "I do think

it silly and selfish of her to mind so much!" . . . They resented each other for days, over that incident.

But to Larrikin, his mother was all that she had once been to the small Larry Munro, and more. Him also she treated as an equal—but she was child to his child . . . adoring him, romping with him, passionately encircling him from harm. . . . Larry's son; flesh and blood of his flesh and blood; treasure of which, years ago, kneeling beside a dead man's bed, she had thought herself irrevocably cheated. Larry's son. . . .

"Get into my train, Muvver!"

"Certainly, Guard. What time does it go? Oh, now directly; I see—Well, reserve me a corner seat, and oh, porter," recognizing me with ticket-puncher and cap several sizes too small, "bring along the lunch-basket!"

"Tain't my job," I argued stolidly. But Larrikin would allow no false pride among his employees, and straightway robbed me of the ticket-puncher and my highest privilege, and sent me along to fetch Felicity's luggage on a truck; then, recognizing that there were elements of fun in this also, hastily punched her ticket, bereft me of the truck, waved the green flag, and, suddenly transformed into the engine-driver, sprang into the front portion of the train and tooted lustily.

"I'm the charger in the loose box!" cried Yo,

shaking herself about in a confined space of chairs, and thudding ecstatically with her heels.

Felicity, as lady passenger, drew out her embroidery. And I, bitterly, asked Larrikin if he would allow me to be the bit of orange-peel on the line, or if that *rôle* too were coveted by himself?

"Toooooo-ooo!" he hooted genially. Then, blowing out his cheeks, "Puff-puff-puff——"

On the threshold of the open French window Barbara stood, staring at Felicity, at Yo and at me, last of all at Larrikin . . . he was fairly unmistakable—her look set into horror. . . . An exclamation choked in her throat . . . she rushed stumbling away. . . .

It was all so soon over, that I remained motionless and bewildered, till Felicity roused me from trance.

"Was that the girl?" she questioned gently—"Larry's . . . fiancée?"

"Yes. I'd better go after her."

Larrikin's shouts of protest followed me down the garden. I overtook Barbara running headlong up the country road in the opposite direction from the station.

"Here's your cap," I said; it had fallen, a patch of blue, amongst the drifts of dead brown leaves.

I seized her hands and pulled her towards me . . . no one was in sight.

"What's all this, Babs?"

"Let me alone—let me alone, Kev—I won't go back—I won't go near her. . . . You too, you ought to have told me. . . . I hate you—I hate you all . . . everybody in the world. . . . Nobody tells the truth. . . ." She wrestled with me—yielded, and dropped down in a little heap on the grass and leaves by the side of the road, trembling in all her limbs—but she did not cry, and her voice, between the gasps, was hard and defiant.

"I'll tell you the truth. Those, the little girl and boy, are Larry's children—you guessed it from the likeness, didn't you?"

"Prue—his mother——"

"Knows nothing about it."

"I'm going to tell her."

And again to my listening ears, the world was a-tinkle with broken china.

"Must you, child? It will hurt her unbelievably."

"I don't care. She ought to know. And I've been hurt too. You told me about—*her*; never that there were . . . babies—Oh, a baby boy that looks like Larry!"

I saw now why Barbara could not and would not forgive. . . . Larrikin belonged by right to her, not to Felicity. Out of all her childishness burst that woman's cry.

"You shan't talk me over this time, Kevin."

I did not try. But quietly held her in my arms . . . and she suffered it.

"Don't tell Prue," I whispered.

"I must. She'll ask me why I'm breaking off the engagement."

"Do you mean to do that, Babs?"

"Yes."

Slim young body, that a man might so easily have crushed; lips softly curved as apple-blossom petals . . . but the grey eyes were inflexible.

"How dare you not tell me, Kevin? I thought you were different, but you're a liar and a cheat like the rest of them. . . ."

"I suppose so," I acquiesced, weary of the whole entanglement. "What brought you down here to-day?"

I was not curious—my thoughts, strangely, were centred not on Larry, unconscious of his happiness in peril and past all peril, nor on Barbara raging in the china-shop, nor on Felicity . . . but Prue. . . . When she heard the blurted story of Larry and Felicity and Larrikin, what would Prue say or do? what of the shrine over which she and Felicity had for years held hands? . . . Imagination halted, appalled at the tragedy so incongruously descending upon the busy, brisk little soul with her housewifely ways.

"What brought you down here today?"

I gathered that Felicity had always existed as a menace and a spectre in one corner of Barbara's idyll; and that Larry, guessing it, had teased her. . . . "When I'm going to desert you, I shall

just say I'm called up North on business—men always do, you know."

And yesterday Larry had informed her he was called up North on business . . . and had sharply chidden her for a suspicious little goose, when she flung out in anger. And had gone. Thereupon she had asked Prue for the address of Felicity's country cottage, and had rushed waywardly down to Thyme Croft, meaning to "have it out" with Larry in front of Felicity; and "have it out" with Felicity too. "You're old; you don't want him any more, and I do; I expect you've been bothering him. So just leave him alone!" . . . Somewhat in this vein would she have abused her rival. . . . I wondered by what fashion of courteous reproof would Felicity have queened the situation, had it thus befallen as Barbara planned it.

"Was he in the cottage? I didn't see. . . ."

"Larry? No—not a sign of him. Nor ever has been—since he met you and cared for you. I expect he was really called up North on business."

Barbara sighed, a quiver in her breath that warned me the tears were not far off, though stubbornly repressed. "He'll be astonished, won't he, when he comes back—and finds out I've broken it off?" Almost she was proud, in her misery, to discover herself capable of taking such a sensational initiative. Then, wholly baby again: "Oh, but I don't want to go home and be nothing special to

anybody. And Mums will be so cross at not getting rid of me after all."

"Barbara, we've all spoilt Larry. Spoil him, too. It's easiest for you, belonging to him. Pretend that nothing is changed; nothing *is* changed. . . ."

I was fighting for Prue, not for her son, this time. But the girl was true to her standards: "I'm *not* going to pretend and tell lies—like the rest of you. And live in a muddle of things that might be found out . . . And I don't belong to Larry—*they* belong to him"—with a furious little gesture towards Thyme Croft. "And his mother is just going to know the sort of man her wonderful Larry is. Oh, it's a shame of him all these years . . . when she's such a dear. A shame! . . . It's no good talking any more, Kevin —I want to go back. Where's the station from here?"

I gave in. Perhaps Barbara's ways were the best . . . what right had I to impose upon her young clarity of vision, our own grey web woven of shade and subtleties? habits of tolerance that might be merely ideals grown dull and torpid and springless.

Perhaps Barbara's ways were the best, even though they meant broken china.

[16]

Broken china . . . and afterwards Barbara went home to her mother. And Larry went to South America.

Justly viewed, it was their tragedy and no one else's . . . but I could not feel it mattered poignantly . . . they were so very young—we were all young together, Larry, and Babs, and I. . . . But Prue refused ever to forgive Felicity, ever to see her again. And though they were only two women, and though lovers count infinitely more than friends when parting and agony are in the air, yet I saw Larry off at the docks, and left Barbara in the taxi while I told Kate the painful news of her daughter returned to her, with a strange absence of emotion, considering what Larry and Babs had meant to me in the way of love and hatred, hatred and love. My thoughts were fixed on Prue Munro in her sudden and violent enlightenment. She sent for me that I might corroborate Barbara's wild statements—and I went, ridiculously the man whom everybody sent for in every crisis.

Why could *I* not send for somebody? I, too, had a point of view, and my little heap of shattered china. . . . Supposing I sat squarely planted in Middle Inn Gardens, and sent for Prue and Larry and my mother and Babs and K. B. Seton and Wentworth . . . how disconcerting to the general acceptation of a static arrangement!

Childishly I *wanted* to send for somebody. . . I have never in all my life dreaded anything as I dreaded that interview with Prue.

She was quite hard and snappish, and—and horrid about it all. She said inadequate things . . . that Felicity ought to be ashamed of herself, for instance

. . . because it is difficult to find words all at once that are up to the level of a big sorrow and disappointment; and the necessity found Prue barren of words save of the kind I suppose she habitually used when complaining of the quality of the beef. I recognized that she was too real and genuine—and too stricken—to indulge in dramatic, poignant, or beautiful effects. The commonplace, facile little sentences in which she gave account of her tragedy made it sound worse than awful—made it sound trivial.

Nothing was Larry's fault. She still vehemently defended her son: "Poor old boy—who could blame him?—at that age . . . he was just a baby still!" And "He'd have told me right enough, only she wouldn't let him . . . Larry was never deceitful."

"Going on all this time—and pretending to be my friend—why, any little thing I could ever do for her . . . I've put off my own concerns again and again to attend to Felicity's."

Her round troll face was rough and scrapy with continuous crying, and I could hardly see her eyes for the swollen pink around them. She deplored bitterly the rupture of the engagement between Larry and the girl "who would have looked after him and made him happy. But I expect *she's* satisfied, now that she's brought about the end of it."

"Felicity wasn't responsible for the breaking off of Larry's engagement; if Barbara had not seen the children——"

Prue's mouth set into chill iron. . . . She would not speak of Larrikin and Yo, would not hear them mentioned. And she never wished to see Felicity again. "Tell her I said so, Kevin, and that I mean it."

But was she impelled to such drastic unforgiveness from anger at the friendship suddenly shown to her, rotted through and through with deception? Or by her outraged mother-love for Larry? Or by respectability shocked? . . . Or else was it—I could not help wondering . . . did it also contain a quiver of protective jealousy for Larry Munro dead? "I believed that she loved you, my husband whom I loved . . . and so I honoured her by a place of equal vigil and mourning. She has betrayed my belief. . . . Now I am left alone beside the shrine. . . ."

Was this what was in Prue's soul? Had it been an audible plaint, I might have combated it. . . . On Felicity's part it was surely no mere faithlessness towards Larry Munro to have lavished herself on Larry Munro's repeated features, and voice, and fascination . . . why, Larry the second may even have besought her with the same words as his father eighteen years ago. Was there truly romance in this or was I a young fool to feel it so vitally, and to condemn Prue for her bitter, withered little judgments?

Ah, no, I did not condemn her, God knows! But my pity was all over the place at this time. . . . Prue had lost a friend and a son and an illusion and

the grandchild for whom she was knitting small woolly socks. But I was alike haunted by Felicity's poignant: "I *must* see her, Kevin. Tell her—I must see her. *Why* won't she at least see me? . . ." And by Larry's eyes, hard and miserable and self-mocking, just before he went aboard at Southampton: "Lucky the firm offered me this job just about now, wasn't it? I'd have refused it, of course, if—Well, good-bye, Kevin, old man—come out and join me if you get fed up with the Bar; and we'll form a syndicate for the promotion of minor revolutions." . . .

"Potter," I said, "have you anything in the nature of a confidence to make to me?"

Potter, thank God, responded in the negative. I inserted my toe in the fat creases of his flesh and gratefully rolled him about.

"All lonely bachelors talk to their dogs, Potter. Or to their pipes, or to a photograph; futile, I grant you, but quite the accepted thing. So you must bear with me." . . .

"Barbara had the best of it, you know—of the five of us. She at least had the fun of ramping about the china-shop. Potter, I've had damned little fun—in fact, none at all." . . .

When I had left Prue, that afternoon, she first pressed me to stay to tea, vaunting Martha's cakes.—And then: "Has Felicity engaged that new cook yet? —I must remind her not to offer a penny more than

thirty-five. . . ." Then, after a pause: "Tell her, Kevin. . . ."

I told Felicity.

PART III —THE DYNASTY

[1]

AND I did not see Larry again until May, 1915, two years after the chaotic results of innocence let loose in the china-shop.

He came to visit me then in the convalescent hospital at Brighton—and already I had been to France, and had come back, and would not go out again. Larry, who as soon as he received belated news of the war, had pelted home to England from an obscure little State in South America, landed soon after I had been ordered out, about January of the new year. Now, with a commission in the Royal Flying Corps, he was expecting to take a flight across the Channel at any moment. As I swung clumsily on my recently fitted crutches across an empty ward, to meet the lithe, alert stripling with the wings on his left breast, the sight of his face made me feel old and battle-scarred and disillusioned.

"Hullo, Hermes!"

"Hullo, Vulcan!"

"That's tactless. You should have carefully not noticed that I was lame—kept up a cheery pretence that I was in hospital for fun or a rest-cure."

"Is it permanent?"

I nodded.

"How disgustingly picturesque of you, Kev!" in petulant complaint.

"You may be able to pull off something more hideously realistic for yourself—but I should hardly have called a fractured femur and snicked heel so confoundedly picturesque."

"Achilles, not Vulcan! my mistake. You should have worn thick knitted socks."

"Who's to knit 'em for me?"

"Doesn't Felicity fulfil her duties as a mother?"

"Excellently—to Larrikin."

With which the first bout of conversation between two comrades re-united, may be said to have ended.

I sat down heavily and Larry surveyed me in silence. I may have looked a bit haggard and scarecrowish, for he broke out:

"If only you'd been in the Flying Corps—I might have looked after you." And struck a match viciously on his boot, to light a cigarette.

I laughed. " 'You shall not hurt my little bruvver' —fourth act, twenty-seventh scene of Babes in the Wood pantomime." . . .

"Well—I'm older than you," in pugnacious tones from the man standing at the fireplace, with his back towards me.

It struck me for the first time in our joint career that Larry was indeed my senior; for the first time I distinctly felt him my senior—experienced a weak and altogether idiotic yearning to put my head down on his shoulder and howl stormily, because I was cut

off from all the fun out there, and because I would never climb rocks again, and because nobody cared . . . and so forth; howl, and be comforted.

I pulled myself together, and began to yarn a bit about my impressions during a month (rather less) in the fighting line. These consisted mostly of monotonous tracks squirming monotonously across monotonous mud—and were not, therefore, of a highly thrilling nature. About my most sensational exploit had been to drop into peaceful slumber one night with my bare head confidently nestled on the parapet; lit by floods of silver moonlight, and in full range of every Hun sniper.

Larry made the ward ring with his shouts of appreciation: "Great Scot! You priceless cherub! And after that concussion in Cornwall too, one might imagine a fellow'd take more care of his curly little cocoa-nut. . . . Heard anything, by the way, of our pals the Setons?"

"Barbara came to see me the other day—last Thursday, I think it was."

We had mentioned Felicity and Larrikin . . . it was inevitable that our conversation should take its present turn. Not that Larry seemed at all disconcerted.

"Babs? Did she? V.A.D. I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, and when are you and she going to get spliced?"

I shifted uneasily—Curse the man, why must he

needs be—indecorous? But the gay, teasing voice continued:

"Waiting in silent heroism for my sanction, I suppose? Oh, I know your painful sense of honour, Kev——"

"Is that sarcasm?" I asked. "Were you by any chance remembering that I gave your show away at Porthgollan, a couple of years ago?"

Larry swore at me.

"Besides," I went on, drearily facetious, "I was under a sort of delusion that Babs was in love with you. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"My dear old chap, Babs doesn't know one man from another yet."

Was he right? I wondered. Such a child still—nineteen last birthday. It had been raining all the morning, but now a ray of pale amber sunshine danced across the floor of the ward, and one bird began to trill from the tree in the courtyard outside, . . . I was in the silly mood to find pleasure in cheap symbolism.

But she had heard Larry whistle the Spring Song . . . and would she ever forget it? How he had wooed her, that night; queer night; we had all been unbalanced . . . and Barbara had wept.

"Well—what's the result of the reverie?" Larry's grin was freakish.

"If I—what about you?"

He understood me: "Oh, I've still got my faithful

old bus—what more can an airman want? 'We bin together nah for forty years'! pity for the sentiment of the thing that they turn us on to a fresh one every few days. I've got to be off, Kev—so long! Stuff yourself up with plenty of butter and cream—you look as if you needed it. And I'll try and get leave to be your best man."

"Good-bye, old son. Good luck."

No, he did not care about Babs anymore. He cared about nothing save the adventure ahead; I had never seen him more radiant and mercurial than now, on the eve of active service.

"Larry," I called him back when he was starting to the door, and blurted out: "Has your mother —will your mother see Felicity . . . now?

"Why *now?* Because I'm on my last leave? Don't be a sentimental ass. Mater's sensible as anything about things, thank goodness. I took her out on the bust last night—revue and supper, frightfully immoral—and booked her up for an encore on my next first night in Blighty; she's as good a sport to trot round as any girl, and not so bunged up with tears and misery and promise-me-you-will-come-back." Suddenly he burst into whole-hearted laughter: "Remember the flapper you saw with me in the Café Royal? What was her name? Phyllis . . . no, Peggy."

"Lord, yes. I remember her every time I see 'Beattie and Babs' on the bill." But I was heartily glad that Prue had been selected for special dis-

tinction. Somehow, I could not bring myself to ask whether he had been equally kind to Felicity . . . it seemed too pitiful that she should be at the mercy of his lordliness.

[2]

Prue visited me shortly afterwards, with nourishing food in such large quantities as to reveal that Larry must have led her to believe the worst about my looks. With her natural aptitude for busy-ness, bounty and economy, the war was a godsend. She was "women of England" concentrated into one firm, tight, competent little bundle; her practical gifts were in full play on about a dozen committees of organization; her warm-heartedness took her the round of a dozen hospitals; her fingers were perpetually sewing or knitting; her household was conducted on a sparse method which would have given new life and hope to a harassed Government perpetually urging "patriotism in the home"; she never let herself be needlessly carried away to enthusiasm or panic by the daily bulletins from the Front; did not neglect Wentworth in her accumulation of fresh interests; and talked about Larry mainly from the point of view of demand and supply, and how to meet his requirements cheerily renewed in every letter, and how best to pack them and send them, and how soon would they arrive. . . . Larry was "all right" now . . . her voice had a relieved note when she mentioned

him; in hourly peril he might be, but it was normal healthy peril, shared by an entire nation of his contemporaries; and tradition sanctioned and approved. The passionate episode of Larry and Felicity had an apart quality, wild and vaporous, that appalled Prue, as not at all included in her scheme of things. But Larry was "all right" now . . . he was doing his duty.

Or so I read her demeanour. Again I dared not mention the children or Felicity. Felicity was pushed by every one into a shadowy corner of disgrace.

But I knew, triumphantly, that through all the bustle and patter of war-work, Prue missed her.

And directly I was dismissed from hospital, and in my old rooms in Middle Inn Gardens, permanently discharged from the Army as unfit for further service, I sought her in vain at the West End hotel, where she was fitfully to be found between bouts of country-house visiting, and expensive vagrancy, and her periods of holiday at Thyme Croft, when Yo and Larrikin were home from school. The house in St. John's Wood had been relinquished after her quarrel with Prue,—no, quarrel was the wrong term for it, quarrel conveyed something snappish and verbal . . . but it was obviously impossible under the circumstances that Felicity could continue to live side by side with Larry's mother, seeing her and passing her a dozen times a day. The "To be Sold" board which still creaked from the front garden wall

of my old home, was a minor result of the energy of a certain young bull.

[3]

"Here, shove 'em over to me; I'll drop 'em in the rack!" Micky was as usual sublime in his tactful method of treating my crutches as though they were a walking-stick; fortunately for the success of his tactics, I was able to limp along in fair comfort without support.

K. B. Seton was sitting in a turmoil of blankets and sheets and pillows on the sitting-room sofa, writing. I gathered from her explanations that she took a flat in town on the same odd but hopeful principles of space as were in force at The Shoe: always have exactly one bed too little, in case one of your family should happen to be away. The game of musical chairs was governed by this system, and had provided amusement for thousands; so that I really do not see why it should not take a perpetual place in the home —"Only," as Kate remarked petulantly, "they so very rarely *are* away—any of them. Such an exasperating set of people! Mick goes into camp sometimes, and of course it looked once as though Barbara were going to be married, but even then I suppose she'd have wanted to sleep at home while he was at the Front. And as for Henry, nothing will induce him to spend a night away from home—and there you are!"

I sympathized. Then: "Where is Babs?"

"Babs is a bit done up with hospital work and has joined a week-end party on the river. She went off with her suit-case after lunch. Four of them in a bungalow: two girls, two men. It sounds pleasant, doesn't it?"

"It sounds mathematically perfect!" I was annoyed at having missed Babs, but sought consolation with Micky, who demanded my war experiences, and sat at my feet asking sage questions, listening with faintly parted lips and solemn, attentive eyes: "The Boyhood of Raleigh" up-to-date.

We were disturbed by another visitor—a handsome breezy girl in V.A.D. uniform.

"How are you, Mrs. Seton? Is Babs in? I want to see her rather specially."

"Don't be ridiculous, Edith. Babs is with you at Bray, isn't she? At Vernie Frome's bungalow."

The girl looked puzzled. "That party was put off till next week-end—didn't Babs tell you? We had a lot of fresh cases in last night, and I couldn't get away. I said I'd let the Oliver boy know on my way home, if she sent a wire to Vernie."

Kate said slowly: "She said nothing to me about a change of plans, when she went off with her suit-case."

And there was a lull in the room, while we all racked our brains for something absolutely harmless which Barbara might be doing with her suit-case. Kate's peculiar insistence on that suit-case lent it a

sinister aspect. But I had not yet fully grasped the situation, nor why the appearance of the V.A.D. should have had so catastrophic an effect. Henry ceased his game of chess with Ned, and complained in weeping accents:

"You should go about with her more yourself, Kate. I always said so. You and your novels! If you kept her bright and amused, she wouldn't have fallen into low company," which contribution, besides being hardly polite to Edith, roused Kate to a semi-humorous frenzy.

"Where *is* Barbara?" I asked, when I thought she had sufficiently mutilated Henry's self-respect. I realized now quite clearly that she was to have gone with this Edith friend of hers and an Oliver boy to a bungalow belonging to one Vernie Frome. Also that yesterday Edith had perforce withdrawn herself and Oliver from the appointment and had left it to Babs to cancel the tryst with Frome. Instead of which she had said nothing at home, but had departed directly after lunch as though the week-end party were still a fact. . . . What sort of a man was this Frome?

"I don't like Captain Frome," said Micky, answering my unspoken question telepathically.

Micky was a good judge. His inflexion instantly described to me the type of man in question.

"It's queer she didn't tell you——" Edith began, and left it at that.

"You're all of you being quite ridiculous and melodramatic." Kate Seton scattered our unspoken suspicions, briskly thumping the bolster, "Babs is enough of an up-to-date girl to walk out of the house for a day or two without fifty explanations and apologies. I'm very glad she has so much spirit and independence——"

"So am I," echoed Henry, currying favour. "It would be a queer thing nowadays if a high-spirited girl couldn't spend a week-end at a pleasant young friend's bunglow without all the world and her own family condemning her for it because he happens to be a male. Especially if she's in uniform," he added fatuously.

"My dear good man, of course Barbara wouldn't dream of spending a week-end at Captain Frome's bungalow under the circumstances. What in the sacred name of George Shaw are you babbling about?"

Henry perceived that he had gone wrong somehow. "Then *where* is she? She isn't here?"

"Oh, I expect she's run away with Frome and married him," Ned threw in. "Your move, Pater. Or do you want me to go after him with a horse-whip?"

"I'll come too, if you do." Micky evidently began to realize some distant prospects of entertainment in the affair.

"He's a great pal of my brother's," Edith said hesitantly.

"That's nothing to do with it," roared Henry, whom circumstance was rapidly peeling of his skin of advanced culture, to expose the well-known paterfamilias beneath. "Where's my daughter?"

"I'm going home."

They all turned and stared at me. My firm thrust into the argument sounded so entirely irrelevant. But I had received sudden and absurd assurance of Barbara's whereabouts. She was in my "den" at Middle Inn Gardens. That being so, it was ridiculous for me to remain here listening to futile conjecture on the subject. Nor could I give the others access to a certainty for which I had no sound or valid reasons to offer.

London, faintly bloomed by the June evening, was a hum and a glitter of beauty to me, from the windows of my taxi. My blood was throbbing, and I perpetually urged the chauffeur to go faster. Barbara is coming to me . . . Barbara has come to me. . . . The rush past of traffic down Kingsway was a triumphal pageant—Barbara is at home—Barbara is waiting——

It was a shock, after all this tingle of expectation, to find the den empty of occupants save Potter, who had turned exasperatingly pathetic about me since my absence at the Front, obedient as the child in a Sunday-school tract story, and sensitive to the verge of tears when I tried to goad him into a display of manhood.

[4]

Presently Barbara came. Her peal at the bell was defiant; and her entrance, when shown in by Thompson, was decidedly overdone: "Hullo, Kev—I just thought I'd drop in on you. . . ."

"You 'dorable 'diculous darling!" mentally. Aloud I remarked, imitating her casual tone, that it was most awfully decent of her; that a fellow did get rather pipped, mewed up by himself; and (sternly) was she aware of the time?

Barbara sat on the edge of the desk and laughed at me, and impertinently swung her pretty silk ankles. She had abandoned uniform for river costume—a short white serge skirt, and white silk shirt wide-flung at the throat, and an emerald jersey and cap. The effect of the attitude, costume, and voice were all assistant props to the daringly informal tone of this visit, but her hand, grabbing nervously at the edge of the desk, gave her away; little trembling hand. . . .

"Kev, isn't this fun?"

"Great fun. Do you always pay calls with your suit-case?"

"Oh, that was to shock you. You used to lecture me for being narrow-minded. Well, I'm broad-minded now—I do all sorts of things. . . . Besides, my people think I'm spending the week-end with a perfectly respectable party at Bray. My best friend, Edie Conway, invited me. But I thought this would be more exciting."

"On the contrary, Babs, your people know there is no such thing as a perfectly respectable party at Bray. And because you probably found it rather *too* exciting, is why you are here now!"

She stared at me, her pupils dilating. "You've seen them—you know—but how do *they* know? . . . . Oh, it's not fair—you should have told me before I—before I—Oh, Kev, I'm in a scrape. Must I go home?"

"Tell me all about it," I whispered. I dared not touch her at that moment of her soft surrender . . . . but she crumpled into my arms and buried her face in my sleeve, and what could I do?

"Babs . . . Babs . . . I love you, Babs."

A sigh was her only answer. Then: "Even though—I've—been—wicked? You can't possibly —Kevin, I used to say such horrid things about people who told lies, and were wicked; and now. . . ."

Well, I was not seriously alarmed at this mysterious "wickedness" at which she hinted. Contact with anything crude or real would have left more tragic, more pitiable traces on such a headlong young idealist, than just this childish fit of crying, and childish impulse to confession. Babs still sobbed her heart out with as much ease as a year ago on the sands at Porthgollan.

. . . "And mother always laughed at me and never bothered, and said I wasn't the sort of girl who had adventures because I'm a prig. And you called

me all sorts of names—and I suppose I was, to send Larry away because he'd had adventures once, but I still think it's horrid, and wanted to stop thinking like that because I did want some fun myself—and they called me the 'Little Nun' in the hospital—but it *isn't* cricket when the men are ill, is it? I mean to flirt with them. The boys say it isn't, and it still seems sometimes that Micky is more right than most people, though he's only a kid and can't know what girls feel like. . . ."

She paused for breath. And I told her, to help her out, that I had accidentally been at St. John's Wood that very evening, when Edith Conway had arrived to see her, and that thus had transpired the fact of the week-end postponed.

"Edith is an ass. . . ." Barbara became thoughtful. "What must Micky have thought—and Mums? What I wanted them to think, I suppose; only I—I meant to explode it on them myself. You see, when Edie told me to let Vernie Frome know, I didn't. I just didn't. I made up my mind I'd meet him at the station as we'd arranged, and go down to Bray with him. Nobody could have called me a prig after that, could they? Not even you, Kevin." Suddenly her face became a confusion of wavering crimson; she slipped from my arms on to her knees beside the chair, and gabbled on.

"Directly I told him the others weren't coming—on the platform—he looked sort of pleased that I should have turned up after all—as though . . . oh

. . . as though it were because of *him*—I couldn't bear that he should think so—any man"; the stung pride vibrated in her tone. "Oh, Kevin, I ran away!" she finished simply.

"To me . . ."

"Yes. But you've made love to me, too, Kevin, in a way."

"I've made love to you because I love you."

"Do you? Truly?" with gaze as frank and direct as while together we had chased Lulu among the corn. "Like Vernie Frome?"

"No. Not a bit like Vernie Frome. Babs, will you marry me?"

I waited for her to mention Larry—and indeed, despite his careless permission and blessing, I felt a shade the traitor in this wooing of Barbara. But she did not mention Larry.

"I suppose even if I married you, I couldn't stop here straight away? But I don't want to go home and face them, one bit. It's such a muddle—they know now, thanks to that idiot Edie, that I knew what I was doing this morning and lied—or at least didn't say anything; and they'll wonder why, and I'll have to explain my motives; and then, even if they approved or—or admired me at all, they'd wonder why I'd come back already; and then I shall have to explain that I was such a duffer that I couldn't pull it through. Kevin, I *have* made a mess of it!"

There certainly did seem to be an alarming amount of her private psychology which Barbara would have

to lay bare for family analysis, before the Setons would suffer her to depart to bed—I winced sensitively in anticipation of some of Kate's choicer remarks.

"Shall I say that I had invited you to do a show and supper with me this evening? And specially asked you not to say anything to them because I intended to propose to you, and was feeling shy about it? So you reluctantly consented, wondering why. And therefore took your suit-case, allowing them to suppose you were going for the week-end. And I had made a mistake in the appointment. And became alarmed. And turned up to fetch you. And then suddenly adjusted my mistake and dashed off to the right meeting-place—I did leave rather suddenly. And we'll walk in now, quite happily, and kneel before Micky and ask his blessing. Shall we, Barbara?"

"Do you mean to say," said she, in a stunned whisper, "that you just made up all that story while we were sitting here?"

It was plain that my imaginative proficiency appalled her; and not without justice, I accused her of being an unreasonable young woman. Here I was ready to perjure myself to any lengths by good stout lying, solely in order to extricate her from a predicament which in itself was compounded all of falsehood.

"Yes," argued Barbara, "but then nobody believed me, and it's all been found out."

"So you are prepared to assert that a lie which comes off is more vile in substance than a lie which is bungled?"

She nodded, her mouth mutinously curved.

"Henceforth, Barbara," I exclaimed in polite wrath, "you shall be allowed to stew in your own juice —of an inferior make and quality. I have spoken."

Barbara's lips quivered slightly—was it pathos or in misplaced humour?

"Kevin!"

Deeply occupied with my tobacco-pouch, I took no notice.

"Kevin, I know I'm right. But we'll pretend I'm wrong, if you like. Because I *have* been wrong once or twice, and may be this time, perhaps, though I'm sure I'm not."

"Your apology is insufficient. Continue therefore to stew."

"Oh dear!" A lengthy pause followed the sigh. Then, as though in self-communion: "And Mums said he could be so easily managed. . . ."

"Your mother's psychology, as usual, was in error —nor is it any good trying to 'manage' me by playing winsomely with Potter, my child. You merely give a Coloured Xmas Supplement effect to a room otherwise in good taste; and Potter and I remain unmoved. He's not that sort of dog! Neither am I," as Barbara, with a delicious gurgle of mirth, transferred her caress from the bulldog to me.

"I do rather love you, Kevin."

"Think I want to be 'rather' loved?"

She interpreted that as a snub, to the effect that her lips rubbed against my cheek was a sensation distasteful to me. All the sparkle and the mischief and the coax passed out of her. Downcast, yet with a forlorn air of dignity, she let fall her arms, withdrew her friendliness, crossed the room, and picked up her suit-case.

"Good-bye. You've been very kind to me. It was very good of you to have proposed what you did. But I've decided to tell them the truth at home. Good-bye."

I limped after her and caught her at the door: "You little goose in a china-shop!"

The suit-case dropped—fell open—a revolver clattered out.

I picked it up in utter astonishment, and recognized it as the one with which Ned used to threaten our community at Porthgollan. "What's this for?"

"Vernie Frome," she answered simply. "I thought I'd better take it with me."

I bit back a storm of laughter at the notion: maidenhood, determined to redeem itself from an accusation of priggishness, lightly tripping forth to light adventure—and all the while heavily armed to the teeth against a complacent and unconscious Captain Frome.

"And do you carry a bayonet concealed, when you're invited out to afternoon tea, Babs?"

"It wasn't for tea, this time," she rebuked me gravely.

"I'm sorry, dear"—I was suddenly fiercely glad of the revolver . . . and of the intention which had been in her soul. Her sincerity swept away melodrama. There was a straight flung, a royal element in it. Royal?—I asked her if she remembered when we sat on the Minneys, and were King and Queen of Cornwall.

"Yes. Wasn't I an infant still, then? Kev, were you serious when you asked me to marry you?"

" 'M! Fairly serious. . . ."

"Because Mums would be most awfully pleased. And Micky, too."

"And I'd be most awfully pleased, too. . , . There remains you, Barbara. You're an important accessory before the fact, you see."

"Do I love you, Kev?"

"Do you? Think it over quietly, child?" But I was wondering how much longer I could control myself to this calmly impersonal strain.

I picked up the revolver; and while she thought it over quietly at the window, her back to the room, I amused myself by loading the chambers from the bag of cartridges which had likewise rolled out of the suit-case.

"I'd rather marry you than anybody else I know, Kev."

I was not elated by the concession.

"And—and it *would* be an easy way out of all the fuss if we went back home to-night with the lie—with the *explanation* you so cleverly invented just now."

"The fruits of my imaginative faculties are at your service."

With hands clasped behind her back, and soft chin tilted upwards, she gravely surveyed me, while she enumerated the various points in favour of our union. The sight of her thus, cool and adorable, provoked me to the same impulse of worshipping destruction as sometimes the first sight of a wild cherry tree in blossom, its pure snows quite serenely unaware of a black, screaming March sky behind it.

"And I feel *safer* with you than with anybody, Kev."

I silently handed her the revolver.

"Why—why do you give me this?"

"Why were you taking it with you to the bungalow?"

"But—you're different from . . . *men*," she pleaded.

"Men are only one man and another man and another, put together. I'm one man, Babs . . . and I love you."

Slowly she laid down the weapon on the desk, to free her hands; held them out towards me.

"I'm not sure, Kevin. But I'd like to try. Will that do? Is that good enough?"

[5]

"It's what I wanted for Babs, all along!"

The Seton children, including Henry and Barbara, had been sent off to bed; and Kate and I were left to discussion of a confidential nature.

'It's what I wanted the whole time we were in Porthgollan together."

"And you never even let me ever so remotely suspect it!" I exclaimed in Henry Jamesian wonderment.

She withered me with a glance:

"Sarcasm doesn't go with your looks, young man!"

[6]

We were married in September of 1915. I had applied for and been allotted a job in the War Office, suitable to my decrepit condition; and swept Barbara off for a fortnight's honeymoon in North Devon, before harsh walls, filmed and speckled windows, the smell of blotting-paper, and the voices of old men bidding other old men file an application for future reference, finally encompassed me.

. . . Great slopes of bracken, down the low hills, and breaking across the level path, and slanting away again to the sea's edge; russet and amber shadows, and orange tips aflame, and over it all the tremble and shimmer of purple. Bracken waist-high, shoulder-high, brushed and broke against Barbara's

headlong trample from the hills down to a strip of sand invisible from above—it looked as though the tawny waves and the blue-green waves met and mingled. I lay half-way, contentedly prone on the oasis of moss and boulder and sawn, damp pine-logs, and watched her . . . swift, beautiful creature of whom I had actually cheated the Larry-dynasty. Our honeymoon was drunk with bracken, with the colour of it, and the warm, reeking fragrance of it.

And I gained again what two or three times before had been mine—playing at kings and queens, for instance, among the pink sea-thrift on the Minneys—a sense of perfect immunity from my obsession of Larry Munro, and the exaggerated perception of a conspiracy which would ever award him what was my due. Was not Barbara, crashing towards me through the bright sway of fern-forest, proof of such immunity? Barbara had been beside me along the sea-thrift too; hers was the healing magic; but then she had evaded me, and become Larry's property. Now she was all mine, and the healing would endure. I exulted in my mind's lightness and liberation . . . and once or twice it seemed, quaintly, as though I only desired still the presence and comradeship of Larry himself, as token that I could love him without hate—young dragon-slayer whom I had last seen so careless of love, and taut for battle. I was aware quite clearly that I had been close to madness that time in Cornwall. It was just as well that my mania had passed

away in a medley of war and wounds, and later happiness; for with every attack it had bitten a greater area of sanity—I dared not contemplate re-visitation. But the more I thought of Larry, the less I could realize my sullen morbid, raging hostility—

I was eager to talk about him to Babs, to test my new freedom, stretch my cramped limbs in it and luxuriate. But she was sensitive of hearing the name of her one-time lover; linked on to Larry were certain youthful exploits in the broken-china line which she was only too anxious to forget . . . and accustomed to Seton tact in the bulk, she would watch me, in sidelong apprehension of an unforgivable reminder, till, as in amused mercy I drew away from the subject, she breathed thankfulness.

I wonder if Barbara minded that I could not race with her, buffeting aside with our bodies the rigid stems and feathery tufts of bracken, down and down through all that golden and red-brown splendour, to the sea's edge.

"Let us rather be philosophical than maudlin, O Potter. And reflect with profit upon the utter nuisance of a slow, painful, laborious, and tiring upward passage against the leaning bracken, which is the penalty of all creatures whose legs of identical length and strength primarily tempt them to the folly of descent!"

I understood Potter to say, "Yes, that was all very well, but——"

[7]

As Larry's one-time fiancée, Barbara would have been an embarrassing and embarrassed guest at the house of either Prue or Felicity; and steadily refused to visit either. I mentioned Felicity once as her "mother-in-law," and Barbara stared perplexed at me, unaware at the moment to whom I was referring. Obviously Felicity was still "that horrid woman," who had destroyed her first romance. And I am convinced that had I spoken of "your daughter-in-law" to Felicity, she would also have been unable to locate an allusion to "that girl" . . . face which was a smudge of white horror suddenly slipped into the frame of French windows between herself and the garden beyond; wide, staring eyes fixed on Larrikin . . . gone . . . and beyond the window, nothing more than a tangle of sunlit greenery. This was all Felicity knew about the wife of her elder son—"She's quite painfully young, isn't she, Kevin?"—yes, she remembered that.

"Twenty."

"And does she still adore Larry? How typical of you to become a *mari complaisant,* Kevin," presupposing my reply in the affirmative; "especially as they're so out-of-date. You always remind me of the Tate Gallery . . . quite good pictures, but nobody goes to see them unless they can't afford a ticket for the 'New Group' exhibition."

I offered my heartfelt if belated sympathy to Prue, for those disconcerting moments when in mutual vigil

over the shrine, Felicity would waywardly scatter the sacred silence by irrelevant and not wholly respectful allusion to the late Larry Munro; it was her fashion not to preserve an atmosphere of hush round the names of the two men she had loved. She rambled on now, rather as one takes a walk without a fixed destination, about Larry, his doings in France, the possibilities of his passionate return to her, and the reasons for his desertion; torturing the simple, cruel truth of the matter into such ornate complexity that, tragically, she ceased to be tragic and became wearisome. Then, abstractedly and quite without malice, she knifed me again:

"I suppose you won't let your wife see Larry, when he gets his leave? No, you're quite right . . . much better not. If he keeps away, she may learn to care for you in time, with your looks; and it's not as though you were stolid or unintelligent . . . on the contrary; I wonder how it is Nina Barclay was always crazy about you?—but the witch who cursed you at birth must have laid down a law 'he shall love where he is not loved.' *Are* you in love with her, by the way?"

"The Hon. Nina? No. She pesters me to buy flags."

Felicity had meant Barbara, of course, but she had forgotten this by the time I came to the flags.

"Is it Nina who works up her sales by displaying a placard with: 'What about Albania?' on it? It worries me so because I'm not sure what about it—I

mean whether I ought to look revengeful or commiserating. I suppose it does as well if I gave her fourpence? It seems silly, though, to the daughter of a millionaire-peer. Have you noticed how bewildered a man looks, poor thing, when he walks away after the purchase? as though he were a brute but not quite sure why, or whether the girls are martyrs offering themselves up for sacrifice to him or to the cold weather or to Gallant Little Bosnia, or if he ought to have accepted her and refused her change, or both, or wrapped her in half his overcoat like the saints. . . . Why *will* they dress them in white muslin in a high wind? It's really asking for it in a way; a nice man walking away is bound to feel rather like the answer to the old riddle—'No, thanks, I don't do that either!' It wasn't a riddle, though—it was heard in a railway-carriage——"

"Which reminds me, when is the children's half-term holiday? I thought of running down to Thyme Croft."

(A slightly hysterical version of my impolite reply to the Hon. Nina Barclay when she offered me a flag: "No thanks," etc., was soon in circulation throughout London; I suppose I clouded Felicity's accuracy by my abrupt interruption.)

"Oh, I've arranged for Larrikin to be brought up for the half-holiday; I've promised him Maskelyne and Devant's, with ices before and after. The monkey! he actually dares to stipulate his own terms. He can't write yet, so he dictates them to Yo."

I raised my brows. "And does Yo likewise stipulate, or only draw up the treaty?"

"Two children are a nuisance to take out," said Felicity evasively. "Has Prue got the workmen out of her house yet?"

"Why—how did you know?"

"I passed there. She'll be cross if they hang about too long . . . the stair-carpet—Prue was always so funny about that ugly old stair-carpet. . . ."

[8]

"Babs!"

"Yes, dear?" She looked up inquiringly at my impetuous return from a visit to Thyme Croft.

"Babs." Again I halted. And if ever a monosyllable implied guilt, embarrassment, confession, shame, and a plea for pardon, my double pronouncement of her name must have done so.

"You've backed a horse," asserted Barbara positively, "and it has lost, heavily." She prepared herself to face ruin.

"War-time? You're mediaeval, my child. Look here, Babs." I crossed the room, bent over her from behind, and took her hands. Some difficult negotiation lay before me, and must not be unduly rushed. . . . "Do you remember Nebuchadnezzar?"

One might have thought, after two years, that the topic of the late field-mouse, however abruptly

brought into conversation, was a safe one. But Barbara's lips quivered—"The darling, oh, the darling! it died. . . . Oh, Kev, the way its rough wee pink tongue scraped my finger! and its little blue shrivelled nose!"

"Quite so. Well—I've brought Yo home and adopted her," impatiently in a phrase scattering my own diplomacy.

"Yo?"

"My little step-sister."

"I didn't know you had a step-sister, Kevin." Barbara was utterly perplexed.

"My dear—think a minute."

"Larry's?" she whispered after a pause. From my lounging attitude over the back of her chair I could only see her cheek's pure inexpressive curve—but her hands had pulled away from mine.

"Can't you trust me, dear? Babs—you brought Nebuchadnezzar home with you that time."

I may have been relying ignominiously on a dead field-mouse of tender years—but my memory of Barbara's one introduction to Yo was not encouraging. And when a man is married, he cannot very well introduce stray children as a permanency into the home, without some little approval from his wife. I was feverishly anxious to gain Barbara's approval for an act of which I could not possibly explain to her the full significance.

For the conspiracy was working downwards through the generations—and as I in childhood had

suffered from Larry's absorption of the love due to me, here again was Yo, mute and fierce and dogged in the like situation. Easy for me to divine what it cost her to see Felicity metaphorically bleeding tenderness over Larrikin—son of her second love who was son of her first love; for there was no one but Larry and Larry and again Larry . . . but the pressure against Yo's very existence must have been suffocating. And if I did not rescue her, who would? Who but I could divine to a fraction of detail the waxing exasperation of the Larry-saga perpetually sung, Larry-idolatry perpetually practised? . . . Yo came in nowhere, had no chance, was not studied, received no petting, was never assigned the occasional throne of importance so soothing to one's infant self-esteem. Yo was superfluous—not even the victim of active cruelty. Oh, I knew—I *knew* life up against Larry was one eternal bruise. And in a very passion of pity, a final surge of hot indignation at some trivial neglect of her which I had today witnessed, I announced my intention to Felicity of adopting the child—"What curious things you do, Kevin!" —and swept her off with me then and there. Indeed, free of the web as I was myself, it seemed my plain duty—if the word "plain" could be used at all in connection with our ravelled destinies. Also it pleased me to think that I had baffled the conspiracy of its victim. And it was not until we were in Middle Inn Gardens, and practically on the

threshold of my door, that I remembered how special strands of the web had once knotted and stretched and snapped between Barbara Seton and Felicity and those babes of Larry Munro. . . .

What would Barbara say?

But Barbara astonished me by a show of impulsive common sense: "Well, as you say she wasn't happy at home, she mustn't stop at home, poor baby!—and that's an end of it. And now," triumphantly, "we can move out of these smoky, poky dens of yours, into an 'airy and commodious residence' with a garden, fit for children to romp in. Hampstead Heath would be jolly."

"Rather too large, surely?"

She routed my sarcasm with energy: "I'll go and rent a house tomorrow, and take Yo with me—and then we'll go and buy a cot and ices, and a rocking-horse and some rabbits—it's a good thing you're fairly rich, Kevin, and it's no good grumbling at expense—you'll never be able to do *that* again now —" as though I had ever dared to do so before! "How old is she, by the way? and has she got any luggage? Oh, and where is the kiddie herself? Kevin," furiously stamping her foot at me, "you haven't been *idiot* enough to leave her standing downstairs as though she wasn't wanted? How could you?" My wife flew out of the front door, and I limped after her . . . then, smiling, halted on the first landing—and listened. . . .

I legalized our adoption of Yo, so that there should be no future interrogation about it. Queer that there was no need to change the name—officially she was already Yolande Somers, my father's name. But Gilbert Somers stood so far away in time and in humanity from this scrap of a child, that "Yo Somers," still struck me with a sense of inapplication and shock.

Yo throve in transplantation, but rendered up neither her fierceness nor her reticence. We all respected each other's secrets, however, and so got on capitally. I was not sure if she missed Larrikin, if she had hated or loved him—or both, as one was wont to do with all the Larrys. Certainly she never demanded to go home; never spoke of home, nor of Felicity; and scowled rather less defiantly at the outer world than of yore, through her shaggy gold mop.

And once or twice, bathed and flushed and ready for bed, I saw her as a mere naked, cuddlesome baby on Barbara's lap; her toes kicking rapturously at the prospect of a romp; or else too drowsy even to appreciate the story on which her latent sense of privilege sternly insisted.

"Not wild beasts tonight; it makes her dream, Kev."

"But, Babs, she doesn't like any other kind."

"Try her with a fairy tale—not too priggish, of course, but—Oh, green and gold, with three wishes

and a red rose-bud, and a talking frog, and a glass mountain, and a happy ending. Try it, it's quite easy!"

I promised miserably to do my best. But under Yo's subtle tutelage, the talking frog permitted to us became a sweet little grey squirrel; and the sweet little grey squirrel became a friendly grey wolf, and the friendly part of it somehow became hungry. . . .

"And so nothing was left of the gallant young prince except a few splinters and shreds which Beauty gathered up and gave decent burial under the red rose-bush——"

"*Kevin!*" a horrified Barbara entered with the night-light, and stood like a reproaching angel above the small bed across which I lay, recumbent but unrepentant.

"You told me to bring in a red rose-bush, and I did. And the three wishes came in quite handy—the hungry grey wolf wished most ardently for the prince's heart, and the prince's lungs, and the prince's liver——"

"And he got 'em, too!" put in Yo, with a shriek of retrospective delight.

"So you see it *was* a happy ending—from the wolf's point of view. And you're doing me a bitter injustice."

Babs put down the night-light beside the cot; and slipped one arm round Yo's warm body, excitedly

plunging up and down in my defence, the other arm about my shoulders. "You're nothing but a big brown baby . . ." she whispered.

[9]

Our son was born in the autumn of 1916.

John Roger Somers, during the first year of his undistinguished babyhood, did not, I confess, enchain me greatly. I had expected that the helpless, feeble clutch of his wee fingers would tug at my heart and arouse it to an unspeakable ecstasy of tenderness—as happens among the Very Best Fathers. But . . . well, Barbara had nearly died against the wall of that brutal cul-de-sac down which Nature forces her women. And I fancied that her involuntary look at me when I entered the room afterwards, held a child's reproachful: "Why did you let it be as bad as this?" . . . By the time she was well again, forgetfulness had folded petal-wise over the agony of those hours. . . . But I remembered—and frankly, I did not consider John Roger worth it.

Neither did Yo. She stated, when pressed for an opinion, that she could just put up with John Roger by assuming that he would one day figure usefully in her games as an animal cub. And as Cub, or Cubby, he was henceforth known to the household.

I cannot account for the bog of utter depression in which I found myself stuck during the spring and summer and autumn of 1917. Logically I was quite

unjustified. With a wife I adored; a pleasant home; a fine son; no money worries; a serene consciousness of having done my bit in the war, with just sufficient damage to cancel necessity of future effort, and not sufficient to render existence an actual misery.

Oh, yes, yes . . . but all this . . . while the Germans were retreating from the Somme battle-fields back to their much-vaunted Hindenburg line. While the Vimy and Messines ridges had fallen. . . . Later, when the bells pealed our victory at Cambrai—our defeat at Cambrai. . . .

And Larry's letters, short, urgent, slang-bitten letters, crammed with that unfailing exultation which the airman especially seems to have wrung for himself out of Armageddon—made me feel as though I had never been in the war; that my one month's grey bubble, blown from froth and glimmer of soapsud dreams, had collapsed so long ago as to be forgotten, uncounted in any contemporary reckoning or future acclamation of the dragon-slayers.

Legend had already sprung out of a certain fascinating fantastic quality in these mere boys from school and college, who invertedly had become immortal while they still lived and battled; far-away heroes of romance in the very stress and zenith of their enjoyment of being.

In the old days a man fought and was mostly inarticulate; one hailed him as a soldier merely. Or else he was a poet, weak in body but great in

creation, whose sole task was beautifully to exploit the soldier. But nowadays, strangely, it seemed that the young soldier and the young poet had established a communion of one; blended strength of limb and unashamed imagination. They could join up, and proudly hail their very selves as chosen, privileged and glorious; they could vaunt their own Crusade in the midst of conflict; and eventually sing their own requiem. The youth of the Great War was still youth as it had always been—careless of danger, impatient of "swank," keen on "stunts." They had their creed and their jargon, in the old way—but in a queer new way they were inspired to detached vision of themselves as a picked and exalted brotherhood of dragon-slayers. It was an age of restless brains and consciousness sharpened to a point; even before the war, youth had been in an impassioned turmoil, alternately philosophic, questioning, and rebellious; ambitions broken off at the start for very haste to achieve the end; feverish digging for beauty, as though a cold whisper were already astir that beauty lay too deep for their predestined limited time on earth. And then, an answer to the question of frank, mutinous eyes under their thoughtful brows, this vital necessity to say all that was to be said as rapidly and as simply as possible . . . or they would be lost; for an invitation had arrived to enlist for Death in Good Company; and must unhesitatingly be accepted.

And we went—God, yes—at least I was in that!—the first thronging rush to arms; those first weeks of blindfold enthusiasm, of lean and arduous training, of readiness poised for whatever contingency. But—I had soon forfeited my place in the good company—left without even the stale comfort of wheezing and chuckling about my entirely ordinary experiences, with my fellow-veterans; experiences that were overlaid, fifty times overlaid by now, with names and news perpetually dropping; for people in war-time ride on the swift edge of the present hour . . . and reminiscences of a month in the quiet part of the line in 1915 could be wedged nowhere into the packed chronicles of 1917.

My useful job at the War Office might receive due printed acknowledgment from posterity—but it had very little apparent bearing on the war itself.

I would grow old and prosy and slothful in a world for which the dragon-slayers had died; their moment of death would harden and get fixed into a glorious frieze round the very rim of the world . . . and so their vivid youth would endure, and their gallantry. But dragons would rear their heads again, as dragons are bound to do. And I, grown older, grown old, would merely yawn in forgetfulness of effort, and bid the lads go into the strife, and leave me to the benefits of my years. And finally I would die, die and be dead, as the dragon-slayers had never died. . . .

[10]

I was saved from this swamp of selfish melancholy —which must have been excessively trying for all those who had perforce to live with me—by the fact of the Cub going into knickerbockers. "He won't be two till September, and this is only March—but look at the size of him, Kevin! he's going to be as big and broad as you. And he's simply ridiculous in dainty muslin frocks."

I duly looked at my son; at his sturdy, round, brown limbs bursting out of their confining brown jersey suit; at his smooth, round, brown head; an air of indifferent challenge in the round, brown, back-curve of him, as he bent over a wooden horse on wheels. And I discovered that the Cub was irresistible, and that the Cub was mine.

I suppose this sudden conversion on my part, corresponded with the heart-throb that ought to have occurred when the feeble clutch of baby fingers, etc.; I was a year and a half late with my paternal emotions. It was not the Cub's helplessness which appealed to me, however,—it was an emanation from him of solemn trust that the world was good, trust that it was my obvious business to preserve whole and unchipped.

Even when passionate, Cubby somehow gave an impression of deep inner serenity which was sure that this annoying surface vexation would soon right itself. And his uncontrollable gurgles of mirth, and deep baying shouts when enthusiasm was aroused.

Oh—call me a fool! call him an ordinary small boy like other small boys, as no doubt he was. But, witness Micky and Larrikin, the genus at all ages held a special attraction for me; and Cubby was mine, made in my image—and out of my love for Barbara.

He was very much a Seton by temperament. There was no fantasy about the Setons; they were real; likewise Cubby. I should have been bitterly ashamed of a child who was wistful and frail and misunderstood. . . .

Through Cubby, my peevish outlook on the war adjusted itself: We were fighting for the next generation; Cubby *was* the next generation. Even the war was simple, whittled down to personal application. And though I still chafed at my inaction, I would not willingly have missed this precious development of Cubby into a man and a brother.

"Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor."

"Which?" Kate asked, beaming on a son-in-law who had shown sufficient intelligence not to encumber the Seton family with yet another nice, normal girl. I shudder to think how our novelist would have blasphemed had Barbara dared to repeat her sex!

"Tinker, I think!"

We were spending a week's holiday, vouchsafed me by my department, at The Shoe—Kate and Henry, Babs, Yo, Cubby and myself. Ned was in Mesopotamia, and Micky drilling vigorously in the O.T.C.

"Soldiers will be extinct, a *rara-avis* in the great

World-Peace following this great World-War—I *don't* fink, as Yo would say. Sailor?—sailors are bound to be agile, for the hauling of ropes and the dancing of hornpipes. The Cub, you may have observed, is fundamentally slow-moving."

"I'm glad of it," said Kate; "he is not far from the edge of the cliff now, and advancing steadily towards it, but if, as you say, he's slow-moving, it *may* give Babs time to reach him. . . ."

We lay among the sandhills, and watched Barbara, with flying hair spread to dry after bathing, and in appearance still very much the goose-girl of nursery rhymes, running swiftly in the distance to the rescue of her offspring.

"We won't look," Kate remarked cheerily; "it's best not; pull your hat over your eyes, Kevin; I'll tell you when the worst has happened. What about tailor?"

"If he inherits his grandam's instinct of cut and colour—no. Tell me, Kate, *are* you now wearing the identical red plush tea-gown and bare feet in which you first greeted my arrival at The Shoe?"

"The same feet, but—let me see, the fourteenth of a long line of tea-gowns. Why not? I detest thinking out fresh fashions—and red suits me."

"And what's happened to the other thirteen?"

"Your son is saved—you may look again. Saved to be a tinker."

"A philosophic tinker. The type that rambles and ruminates, of a kind that never was on land or sea,

but only in picaresque fiction. A shrewd and wise and contented tinker. Is it my fancy, Kate, that Cubby is by nature shrewd and wise and contented, as well as altogether beautiful and remarkable?"

"Not a patch on Micky. But a tolerably nice child. Pull yourself together, Kevin. You always had a trick of over-estimating people; there was that *very* ordinary young man, Larry Munro, for instance. . . ."

[11]

"Dear old Kev,

"Got back to the crowd here after four days in Paris, to find the Bosche very active and hostile, and plenty much work doing. Had a top-hole time in Paris. I went down the line in a lorry, officially to examine some new Ack-ack sights for the Lewis gun, but really to live for a while in splendour and magnificence at the Hotel Elysée. Arrived in Paris and bathed luxuriously, and clad myself in my most elegant gent's flying suiting. After lapping up two very fine cocktails—remind me to show you how to make them one day, old man—I sallied forth in search of adventure. By extraordinary luck I ran into Armand St. Just, Captain of Chasseurs Alpins, and as smart as paint. I met him once when he was pretending to be a liaison officer, and found him a thoroughly stout fellow. We saluted on both cheeks —like the Kaiser and the King—or isn't this tactful?

'Ce cher St. Just!' 'Munro, mon gars, you have the leave, yes? Then will I show you Paris.'

"He did—and with such zest that I missed my train to B——, where I had to meet a draft and take 'em along. I arrived about five hours late, and sought out the R.T.O. He, of course, was nowhere to be found—probably tasting rum to see it wasn't too fierce for our gallant lads, etc., etc. However, I found a sergeant, who was quite sympathetic, but could offer no solution. The damned R.T.O. had gone off in his car, the swine, or I'd have felled him and pinched it.

"Eventually I slid off, and drifted into an estaminet in the Rue de St. Paul; I was the only visitor, and I was served by the fair hands of—Marie Blanche, her name was, Kev, and not half bad! She adored me at once, and by-and-bye I found myself telling her all my troubles. 'Attendez, monsieur'—she rushed into the back room, and returned shortly, proudly wheeling a push-bike—*a girl's push-bike*, Kev, at least a hundred years old! But it might save me—I gave her 20 francs for it—all I had left—and kissed her rather wistful little mouth; then I rode off amid fanfares of trumpets and loud shouts of delight from the populace.

"I knew the general direction, the roads happened to be pretty good, and you know what troop trains are in France. After four hours or so good solid pedalling, I found the train lying about in a field and

hooting disconsolately. I threw my trusty bike away and sprang aboard . . . and that's all.

"How's Yo? I've often wondered why you adopted her—you're a queer devil, Kev. But bring her up not to smoke till she's in her teens, and keep your language pure in her presence, and she *may* grow up a credit to me! I heard when I was in Blighty about six months ago that you were also a father! My daughter to your son . . . wot about it? Pity the ages don't fit.

"Love to Babs.

"Yours,

"LARRY."

Somebody plucked at a muted string, and it twanged once, irritably. . . . Then a voice said, laughing: "Banjo solos for two. . . ."

It was a jolly letter; I read it to Barbara, and we both reviled Larry for not having hunted us up when on his last leave—"But these R.A.F. fellows choose to have a roaring time when they get back—and we're a bit domestic with our houseful of brats."

"Only one of them happens to be Larry's brat," she reminded me gaily . . . Then, as though at the sound of her words, the hot blood crept slowly up her neck and poured into her cheeks.

The children were playing with a giant Noah's Ark on the lawn quite near. She called out: "Yo, I've got a treat for you—come indoors!" The two

whispered eagerly for an instant, Bab's lips pressed against Yo's ear; then, the latter hurrahing at the top of her pitch, they ran into the house.

Cubby, suddenly abandoned, looked round for his playmate, then for his mother. Finding neither, he pondered awhile; then pugnaciously decided to make the best of it and not cry, . . . but there seemed to me a forlorn quality in his back curve as he bent to pick up the animals knocked over by Yo in her flight.

Always susceptible to the Cub's back curve, I was slightly annoyed with Barbara—Why should not the treat have been equally for both babies?

The little scene, just over, re-enacted its gestures in my brain as though by clockwork marionettes. . . . It was entirely familiar; had happened before, a great deal oftener than once; only *I* was Cubby and——

With the shattering violence that burst apart the very seams of the sky, the old sick Larry-conspiracy pounced on me out of the past. . . .

Screaming, it shook me, twisted me and tore me: "You did it yourself! You did it yourself!" Yes, I, who in my arrogance had thought to have escaped from the cursed zone, had deliberately gone back into it to fetch out Yo and lift her into this established sanctuary, Larry's child with my child.

Oh, the conspiracy was not by any means worn out. Of far too diabolically tough and sinuous material, it had merely stretched its capacity for torture into the next generation.

Cubby. . . .

"Cub—take that poultry out of your mouth."

Sorrowfully he eyed me. I repeated my command, sure that that peculiarly vivid shade of cockscomb was not wholesome. He took it out of his mouth and threw it at me—then sat down plumply on the grass and chuckled, happy again. . . .

Cubby had got to remain happy, if I murdered Yo for it.

Up till now, I had been deadly afraid that this new phase of an old drama would reduce me to madness. I had been near enough to it that last time in Cornwall, and through the reeling air had dinged a warning. . . . But now I was no more afraid. The decision had spurted with such simplicity straight out of the instinct of self-preservation. For my son was myself, a thousand times intensified. Whilst the conspiracy had been personally directed against ego, my hate of Larry was too intricate, too tangled up with love, to allow of stark action. But what threatened the Cub and his peace of mind went beyond all complexity; and I was sane in his defence, so sane that it felt as though the clean, steeled edges of my mind could clash and cut.

If Yo were perilous to one fraction of his present and his future happiness, then Yo must be eliminated. Elimination, if it were to be complete, meant murder. I, lonely sentry who had betrayed my vigil, was the only possible murderer.

This settled ("It's all right, Cubby, old man" . . .) I could begin to think matters out in detail and at leisure. I was rather interested in the recurring process of this Larry-conspiracy. . . .

"It isn't a personal matter at all—Prue and Felicity met and broke over Larry Munro—but there were two Larrys, and then a third. And three times I stretched out to Felicity across Larry Munro and his son and his grandson, and couldn't reach her, touch her even. . . . Then Barbara came into it—Larry and I, and Barbara between us. And I won. And now Yo and the Cub are in it—and I've lost what I won . . . that doesn't matter. Only that *I* of all people should have tried to save Yo from being cramped out of existence by Larrikin, in his well-known way—The Conspirator must have intended that—cynical old brute! Babs and Yo—Babs with Larry's child—how could I miss the significance?—I had seen a mother before with Larry's child instead of her own—seen? *felt* it . . . and then to blunder stupidly, incredibly—But the Cub wasn't born then —*my* son.

"My son—Larry's daughter—So Babs still loves him—best."

That hurt for a moment. I suppressed the hurt sternly. Except as they affected the Cub, my conclusions were squandered. For this was not an aimless spilling of hate upon the ground, as when in Cornwall I had witnessed Larry's intrusion. He had intruded again—or the symbol representing him—and I must

lop away incoherence and waste of emotion, concentrate on vital attack—that the Cub should fulfil his life; that the Cub should not be drained slowly, helplessly, unknowingly as I had been drained by that—that damnable abstraction!

"For it *is* an abstraction, the Larry conspiracy. . . . You suffer it—like Fate. Or machinery, grinding itself out. . . . Oh, some conspirator must have originally planned the machinery—Yet it almost seems too elaborate to be focussed entirely on to one quivering spot of life—ours—mine—

"—Can the whole universe be worked on this system? Every man with his inevitable Larry?". . .

"Kevin, you'll be late—it's a quarter to nine. And the King of Cornwall is due at Whitehall. What an old dreamy-head you've been, just lately!"

"Right, dear. And I'll get the seats on my way back—for Saturday night do we want them? Did Micky say he could manage it? Good old Micky!"

. . . "Two inside . . . full up now . . . Outside *only*—I said outside only, sir . . . Sorry, sir, didn't notice. . . . Get in. . . ."

Umbrellas, and the stuffy smell of wet skirts in the omnibus. If any penalty of crippledom is unutterably boring and degrading and horrible, it's the necessity for ever to ride inside—

Every man with his inevitable Larry?

I was sure now, and for several days past I had

been sure, that the idea which had toppled to me out of space, solved the Conspirator's perplexing riddle. . . . The Mad Hatter had been the first to shriek it: "No room! No room!" "There's plenty of room!" said Alice—and sat down. But the Mad Hatter knew best.

Where two humans existed were only space and place for one; love for one; achievement for one. Each man, dimly aware of this pressure, would, if asked, own to a particular aversion that a certain other individual should have all the luck. Few natures are universally jealous. Yet jealousy is everywhere rampant—people are jealous of people-in-particular. "I don't grudge it her—or him"—the phrase abounds. . . . No, of course you don't, when your Larry-nerve isn't twanged. You, John Robinson—grumbling at some lack; but your every desire is fulfilled, it is the distribution of fulfilment that has gone wrong. . . . William Brown has the positive to your negative—if you were fitted together, the two of you, one man completely satisfied would be the result. . . . And so William Brown irritates you, you begrudge his apparently irrelevant strokes of luck in the same measure as Harry Thompson's leave you unmoved. . . . Why yes, man—don't you see? it's just the old affinity belief made reversible . . . each soul with its affinity on earth . . . each soul with its Larry on earth—William Brown is your Larry—perhaps his father and your father—perhaps his son and your son—have been and will be similarly in-

volved in the Conspirator's plot—backwards and forwards—cross-currents, and cross-relations. . . .

And this is hatred.

Hatred loose in the world; hatred usually supposed irrational. . . . Have I, set apart from all men, been forewarned by a glimpse at the very Machinery whence hatred comes crashing and grinding? Indeed, it seemed to me now, standing a tiny figure at the foot of realization, shunned and isolated, that I was yet empowered by sudden vision to brandish unawed defiance of his schemes in the grinning face of the Conspirator himself.

Me you have mangled in your humorous device—yes, how you must have chuckled when I stumbled into fatuous guardianship of the child Yo!—Oh, I grant you the fun of it—but with me it stops. You made a mistake in stripping me of blindness—for, now, aware and participant, I can save the Cub.

"Yes, Micky—an excellent show; what did you think of the fighting bit in the last act? Du Maurier wasn't expecting it, you know—it was an entirely spontaneous notion on the part of the third super. . . . All right! Hands off!—I didn't mean it—apologize. 'Fraid it's too late for supper anywhere, old man. There's a European war in progress. . . . Something about no drinks after you've ordered food with it before half-past nine unless you let the lady pay for herself. I don't quite tumble to the stunt, but it's the way to win the war."

Child-murder. They were ugly words, especially used in conjunction. And yet—I was not intending to hurt Yo, only to stop her, as you might gently stop the ticking of a clock by a finger laid on the pendulum. If I let her live, would Yo ever stand, a radiant, supple bit of girlhood, slightly pressing backwards against a man's hard arms, that she might the more deliciously enjoy yielding? lie there with hidden lips shaped to kiss, quiescent in happiness?

Or was creation dormant under that strong, yellow thatch of hers? Some divine picture unpainted —an inspired poem unwritten—splendid limbs, unmoulded as yet in statuary . . . she might well have inherited Felicity's capricious genius. Was she actress or musician in embryo?

Whatever it was—murdered.

Could that be called murder, which denied a child ecstasy as yet only shadowed forth—immortality unborn and only dreamt of? A negative form of murder—"I can't stay to take pity for that." . . . Fond of Yo—I *was* fond of Yo—but what mere fondness could endure one second without destruction in my possessive scorching passion for my son?

I took very little notice of Cubby these days—Mrs. Seton remarked that I was growing sensible. I dared not show him natural petting affection while I still had that to do on his behalf which was —unnatural. Afterwards——

For him, freed from the dynasty, fair running, and no kick at the heels. He would grow up a dragon-slayer, ardent and full of laughter. And for me, what afterwards? I should, no doubt, be glad enough to be hanged by the neck until I was dead, which sounds a lengthy process, but is, I believe, a swift drop to oblivion. But having mentally promised Cubby fair running, I should hardly be justified to start him with a father who had suffered the extreme penalty of the law.

Easy to forget, these days, having been oneself a disciple of the law. Almost all my briefs had been criminal cases—minor criminals, certainly. Well, I should have to arrange matters so as to be a mere minor criminal; ignominious, but necessary—for Cubby. Too much to hope for a verdict of Accidental Death, I suppose . . . though I'll aim for it. Manslaughter—three years—about that! From their point of view what possible *motive* could I have had, to murder Yo?—wicked, indigent step-brother who lures heiress into his charge! . . . fortunately, I get no obvious benefit from Yo's death. And they'd all bear witness that I adopted the kid, and——

If I just gave her back to Felicity? . . . O God, I don't want to have to do murder, if I can help it.

"That's no good. Babs would never allow it . . . worshipping her as she does—Larry's daughter. She'd never allow it—for Larry's sake."

Babs . . . she'll think it funny that anything quite so crude should happen in one's own house . . .

murder is a thing that happens in the papers! or, at the worst, to other people acquainted with people who are acquaintances.

And Felicity? will she object? Yo happens to be hers. . . . I had forgotten that, too. Oh, but I doubt if she ever noticed a daughter lying about—she's got Larrikin.

Nobody will mind much. Barbara at first . . . but when there's no rival, she'll give all she's got to the Cub. Nobody will mind much—except Yo herself, and she'll never know.

I'll know. Three years—and then perhaps thirty, forty years of knowing. Cubby, Cubby, it won't be pleasant, little chap, to sleep and wake for forty years with the knowledge of oneself as a child-murderer. . . . It was for that they denied me enrolment among the dragon-slayers out there.

Never mind, Cub, my son. It's for you, instead. Same thing . . . only better.

[12]

"Bang! bang! bang!"

"Now I'm dead," said Yo, impersonating an orang-outang of enormously ferocious tendencies. I, Fernandez Bolingbroke, explorer,—the name was of her choosing—had levelled my revolver full at the brute's heart, while with the other hand I shaded my eyes from the too dazzling rays of the mid-African

sun, and—bang! bang! bang! "I'm dead," said Yo.

Obviously she would have been, had the revolver been loaded. . . .

We played the hunting game every night. It was Yo's unvarying choice. Her rôle she altered from time to time—tiger, panther, lion, bear, wild-boar-constrictor (specially invented) . . . anything of the deadly genus that slunk or prowled or butted or gnashed or coiled. But to me was allotted unwearyingly the part of Fernandez Bolingbroke, allowed an occasional success and many failures; to compensate me for my failures, she pointed to the fascinating weapons at my disposal, ranging from paper-knife, *viâ* a skipping-rope lasso, to the actual trench-dagger and Colt which had been in use at the Great War.

"And I always let you come to life again after I've deaded you, Kevin!"

"Of your graciousness, you do certainly, Yo. But only that you may have the pleasure of deading me again tomorrow."

She twinkled her white teeth at me—Yolande Somers will one day commit lethal damage with her sudden and most attractive smile!—At least, she would if——

Oh—if I start to be sentimental over the business . . . if I begin to point out effects of cheap irony—Look, is it any more callous to contemplate murdering a child during its playtime than during its sleep or meals or walks or embraces . . . any other damned

flowering innocent moment of their twenty-four hours?" Look, you sentimentalists, is it?

And—oh, confound it!—I *like* children . . . I like playing with Yo. . . .

Steady. . . .

It happens to be convenient to murder her while she is a wild beast and I Fernandez Bolingbroke. I shall be able to take deliberate aim at her heart; and not, through haste, or interruption, or desire not to be seen, bungle the moment and hurt her, and leave her alive. And the whole incident will have an appearance of accident. Everybody, Barbara, the nurse, Kate Seton, can testify that we were in the habit of playing thus, with unloaded firearms and other realistic imitations of the real thing that came handy for attack. . . . "Kev was always so careful with kiddies; he adored them."

How in face of this, and of my agonized denial of intention—Yes, Cubby, I hate to lie about it, I'd much rather not; but this is your show, not mine—how can it be proved that I remembered Ned's old revolver was loaded? . . . The very one which Barbara had brought along in her suit-case that time. I was doubtful if she had seen me load it in whimsical semi-abstracted mood, in readiness for her use against me, during that love-scene between us. . . . Captain Vernon Frome here flings a satirical comment into the jumble of events and persons involved. . . .

A man can easily have forgotten to take the precaution of looking, when in lieu of his own Colt (sent

away for mythical repairs to the trigger) he seizes an old Webley out of the desk drawer where it had lain ever since.

("Kev—darling . . . don't give it back to Ned—You'd have to explain how you got it, and—and—they'd think me such a fool! Let him believe he's lost it!"

"Very well, darling; but I shall have to give him some irrelevant article of compensation, or I shall feel like a thief all my life."

And Ned never quite understood why I suddenly and fondly presented him with a neat set of hair-brushes. . . .)

A man might very easily have forgotten that instant of loading. . . . Unpardonably careless?—why certainly; for that, I shall do penance for three years. . . .

And for what I had *not* forgotten—a longer penance.

Babs is showing more and more partiality for Yo. Soon the Cub will be of an age to become tortured by it. But by that time—nothing will be left to torture him. I might as well have brought one of hell's demons into the house, as a child of Larry Munro!

Yesterday I sent away my Colt for repairs to the trigger.

There is no need for delay now.

[13]

Jim Rollinson, from the casualty department of the War Office, met me on the steps as I came out, and suggested I should lunch with him.

To an old schoolmate and a cheery fellow, in spite of some internal damages received in Mesopotamia, I could hardly be surly. He told me, over the fish, that Larry Munro, of the R. A. F., was down in that morning's black list.

"You remember Munro, don't you? Was he at Runchester in your time? Must have been. Brilliant airman, they say—up to all sorts of stunts and dodges. He was seen crashing into the Hun trenches with his machine in flames, after he had taken on about four Bosches single-handed. Tanner, V.C. was his observer and, of course, got done in at the same time—Awful pity! Two of our best chaps." . . .

And I should have to tell Barbara.

Larry had beaten me again. A swift and insolent climax—literally blazing out of the skies—Oh, cursedly pictorial!—and he was a figure on the frieze of dragon-slayers, fixed into an immortality for ever . . . alert and young and heroic . . . beautiful. Well done, Larry!—and you've trumped me with an ace, final and irrevocable.

Your death over my life.

I shall have to tell Barbara, who loves you.

And after that . . . something else, something unpleasant, to be done . . . I've forgotten . . . but it was not heroic, like Larry's end. . . .

"Babs, Larry is killed."

She stared at me, with grey-blue eyes dilating, as they always did in a moment of shock. Then: "Oh, Kev, Kev, supposing it had been you!"

And both her arms flung round my neck; her body quivering close, close against mine. . . .

[14]

There is a fairy tale about three bands of iron bound about a man's heart, and the bursting of them asunder. . . .

How long my brain had been clamped in iron, I cannot tell, nor of its gradual tightening till I was as near to madness as a man can go without betraying himself to an unsuspecting world. But Barbara's one simple cry from the very spring of spontaneity, set me free again, free as I had never been before, from hate and obsession and . . . yes, I had remembered now, but with a sense of distant amazement . . . from murder.

"Oh, Kev, Kev, supposing it had been you!"

All my life long the cry had been reversed. Now and at last the evil spell was pierced, and I was to slip into my place as some one who mattered more,

intensely more than Larry. . . . Barbara's sob of sheer relief was that in losing Larry she had kept me.

Why, then, Babs, you love me? Indisputably, you love me. In an instant of crisis the truth rushes up to the surface.

And loving me, you love my child best? Do you? . . . I asked her. And she replied, wonderingly:

"*Of course* I'm fondest of Cubby. That's why I always tried so hard to give Yo a specially good time . . . because it would have been so hateful for her to feel the difference. Wasn't it to save her from that, you brought her to live with us? But . . . you knew, didn't you, Kev?—Why . . . Kevin . . . Cubby's *ours*."

"No. I didn't quite know. Never mind, dear . . . never mind that now."

There would be a bad hour for me presently, when I should have to force realization until I came face to face with the intention which squatted low and hideous in the centre of my late madness . . . no shirking for Childe Roland, till he stood opposite the very Dark Tower itself. . . .

But just at first and for a little while, to know myself free, to know that Barbara loved me . . . loved me *best*, that was the glory of it; to know that the Cub was safe without my performance of (face the Dark Tower, if you can!) of child-murder; and that the Larry-thing did not exist, had never existed save in grotesque imagination. To know that the Conspirator was God!

It was enough.

I wanted to shout aloud my gratitude from a choking throat—gratitude for this gift of myself once more, myself burst from the yellow wrinkled skin of a sloughed obsession. Gratitude to Barbara; who loved me, and had told me so in time—just in time, little ignorant, innocent bull in a china-shop—she never would understand how her last bout had sent the sombre heavens reeling and rocking and crashing about me, in a hail of black, broken china, fragments and splinters of black china . . . and beyond, blue, washed spaces. The world and the heavens were mine in this new exultant hour. Barbara and I were King and Queen of Cornwall, lying high among the pink sea-thrift, the sun stammering its last gold upon the sea and upon us—the dark waters pouring away into the cold, shadowy clefts and caverns among the rocks below. King?—I was a conqueror, a prisoner acquitted, a child reborn, a dazed, incoherent lunatic. . . .

"Kevin, you're hurting me . . . Kev—why, what's the matter?

. . ."You've never kissed me like that before," said Barbara, rather breathless, a little reproachful, as I released her. But her bruised lips quivered to a smile, and she added, lest perhaps I should never kiss her like that again: "I don't mind. Only—Larry's dead, and . . ."

Well, I was not likely to misunderstand anew. She simply felt as a child feels, that it is not right

to be joyous after fresh tidings of death . . . for awhile at least, a conventional lowering of general atmosphere must be maintained.

But her reminder smote me as though I were hearing for the first time that my friend Larry Munro had been killed; for indeed, it had been another man who had heard the news from Jim Rollinson. Larry—Larry—sorrow was fifty, a hundred degrees more poignant than I had ever dreamt possible, but it was at least no isolated horror, but shared by two continents mourning their losses; I could grieve with my kind, now, as I could love with them, and achieve with them . . . after twenty years' exile.

Larry himself had once said: "You'll go mad because of me, Kev." . . . Larry—dear old fellow—if you had been returning on leave once, only once again, I could show you that your prophecy had come true, and would come true never any more; I could show you at last a true and decent and straightforward friendliness . . . love, if you like. Men are allowed to talk of having loved each other, when one of the two is dead. That particular nerve has twanged finally, and is broken. . . . Larry, I swear, it only needed one human creature to disperse the conspiracy by placing me before you, to show me that there was indeed no conspiracy. . . . Oh, Larry—Larry Munro!

And Babs murmured, sadly, her head against my arm: "He was so *alive* in that letter."

[15]

I waited till the next evening before I summoned courage and went to Prue.

She had lost—well, as though I had lost Cubby, with twenty-seven years' added accumulation of tenderness.

Wentworth opened the door to me; his eyes were red, and his dishevelled hair pointed to a crest; so that, in opposition to his neat beard, it was ludicrously like a head and its reflection in water, a beard at each end.

"Come in, come in, Kevin. No, you can't see her, my boy. No, she's not alone. Felicity is with her."

"Felicity?" a sudden gladness shot my gloom.

"My sister sent for her at once. Strange—after they had quarrelled so definitely—let me see, already before the war, wasn't it? About four years now. I never quite grasped the reason. But Felicity came immediately; I must say her speed did credit to her good heart, but she was fond of Larry, poor boy! poor boy! we were all so fond of him. And they've been shut up together ever since. I went in once, to see if Prue would like a fire—sometimes a fire is a comfort in great grief—even in summer. And there they were, not exactly crying, but talking . . . about . . . about. . . . "

Wentworth stopped. He seemed agitated and unhappy, as though some element in the reconciliation

were, to quote his favourite phrase, "irregular."

"About Larry?" I suggested.

"Yes—about Larry, certainly. But—I'm not sure—I stayed a little while—the fire was obstinate . . . it's a bad grate, and I didn't want a servant to disturb them. But I'm not sure that they weren't talking about Larry Munro as well—Prue's late husband, you never knew him, of course. Did you? Ah, yes, yes, I remember. But so long ago, and from the very first we could never get her to mention him: it seems so queer, *now*. . . . They talked, and I could really hardly distinguish which Larry they meant." . . .

[16]

I walked home to Barbara, to a jolly nursery tea and a romp with Yo and the Cub, with a feeling upon me as though the streets' fret and bustle had been unwontedly quenched to serenity. Somewhere out there men were blindly dealing pain, and a young dragon-slayer had been violently hurled out of life . . . but here, at home, you could still occasionally stumble across beauty, a quiet thing in its scooped-out niche among noise and raw misery.

Two women, friends again, sitting together and talking of Larry Munro. . . .

How they had loved him! And loving him, each other! And yet it seemed again as though they could

meet only over Larry Munro dead. As flesh and blood, he awoke in them bitter rivalry; as flesh and blood, they strove for him, and were hard in forgiveness. As a memory, they found tender comfort in their companionship of sorrow, each rejoicing proudly in the acknowledgment of Larry's peerlessness, paid him by the other's grief. It had happened twenty years ago; it was happening now. And twenty years hence——?

Whether the Larry-conspiracy driven against me had ever existed or not, I cannot say—but this much of settled fate is undeniable: that for Prue and Felicity could be no other child or boy or man significant to them than this one mobile, insolent, mischievous Larry repeated down the dynasty . . . how often?

There was still Larrikin.

Wentworth had mentioned, before I left, that Felicity was taking Prue with her to Thyme Croft the next day. Once more, two women and a shrine and a small boy . . . I was glad to the very core of my heart that I had rescued Yo from her position as me, in this reminiscent phase of an old story.

Yes, we were cut away and adrift from it now, Barbara and I and Yo and the Cub; but . . . would the queer lilt and break in the saga inevitably recur? and presently, when Larrikin was older, would they yet again find it impossible to share him? Wife and bride, mother and lover, grandmother and mother, group it how you will, the essence of their

passion remains the same, faithful and fierce, denying the other's claim.

No matter. For the moment there they sit together, talking of Larry. . . .

THE END

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